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Three Logics of Normative Justification in Catholic Debates on Marriage

1. *The Question of Moral Justification*

How can we determine which actions are ethically good and responsible? How can the validity of moral norms be justified, and which sources of ethical knowledge may legitimately be invoked? These classical questions of fundamental ethics arise with particular urgency in contemporary debates about marriage and sexuality. At stake in these debates is whether moral norms should be justified primarily by an understanding of marriage as a reality established by God or through the quality of lived relationships. Different logics of justification – and with them different normative languages – therefore intersect in this discourse and contribute to the controversies that characterize current debates. For this reason, the present article offers an analytical discussion of selected models of normative justification, since such clarification is essential for a deeper understanding of these debates. The moral theologian Stephan Ernst similarly argues that discussions of this kind require not only debating individual normative claims but also examining the hermeneutical frameworks and underlying approaches to ethical justification themselves.[1] Accordingly, the following analysis does not focus primarily on the substantive content of the church's teaching on marriage. Instead, it addresses meta-ethical questions concerning the structure of normative justification. More specifically, the article first reconstructs the ontological-teleological justificatory structure underlying the church's doctrine of marriage. It then examines the hermeneutical logic of mediation developed in Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia*. Finally, it situates the relationship-oriented evaluative logic of current reform discourses – particularly the text *Life in Successful Relationships – Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership* from Synodal Forum IV of the German Synodal Path – within this broader framework. The following meta-ethical analysis should therefore be understood as a systematic reconstruction of the justificatory logics implicit in these texts.

1 See Stephan Ernst: "Korrekturbedarf gegenüber der Tradition: Zur notwendigen Weiterentwicklung der lehramtlichen Sexual- und Beziehungsethik", in: Konrad Hilpert/Jochen Sautermeister (eds): *Kirchliche Sexualmoral vor dem Abgrund: Theologische Perspektiven zum Synodalen Weg*, Herder, 2023 (Katholizismus im Umbruch; 16), 135-156, 137. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from German-language sources are my own.

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2. *The Ontological-Teleological Foundations of the Church's Teaching on Marriage*

The church's teaching on marriage grounds its normative authority primarily in an ontological understanding of what marriage *is* by its very nature. Within this framework, Christian marriage is understood as a lifelong, exclusive, and freely chosen union between baptized persons that reflects the covenant between Christ and the church. In this sense, marriage is regarded as a sacramental sign through which the grace of God becomes present and effective. On this basis, several essential characteristics are traditionally attributed to Christian marriage.

(1) "Established by the Creator". In its Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, the Second Vatican Council describes marriage as an "intimate partnership of married life and love" (GS 48),[2] which "has been established by the Creator and qualified by His laws" (GS 48). This formulation expresses a fundamental theological claim: marriage is neither merely an ecclesiastical institution nor a purely social convention (see also AL 72) but a reality grounded in the order of creation. In this sense, marriage is understood as a reality instituted by the creator.

(2) "Ordered Toward Certain Ends". At the same time, marriage is described as being "ordered toward the good of the spouses and the procreation and education of offspring" (CCC 1601). This formulation highlights the teleological structure of marriage. Marriage possesses an intrinsic orientation toward certain ends – an orientation that is not externally imposed but inscribed in the reality of marriage itself. Accordingly, moral norms – such as those concerning fidelity, permanence, and openness to life – do not appear as secondary moral prescriptions but as the unfolding of this given teleological structure. The orientation of marriage toward these ends, therefore, entails specific normative claims.

(3) "Elevated to the Dignity of a Sacrament". The ontological structure of marriage is further deepened through its Christological and sacramental dimension. According to *Gaudium et spes* 48, spouses are strengthened and, as it were, consecrated by a special sacrament. In this context, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* – referring to the *Codex Iuris Canonici* – speaks of an "efficacious sign, the sacrament of the covenant of Christ and the Church. Since it signifies and communicates grace, marriage between baptized persons is a true sacrament of the New Covenant." (CCC 1617) Through its sacramental character, the ontological structure of marriage acquires a deeper theological meaning, which is expressed particularly in the indissolubility of marriage. This indissolubility refers to the permanence of the marital bond, the irrevocability of the covenant between the spouses, and the lifelong validity of the marital union as a sign of Christ's faithful love for his church.

(4) "Personal Consent". Marriage is further understood as a freely chosen act "whereby spouses mutually bestow and accept each other" (GS 48). This mutual self-giving should not be interpreted as a merely contractual arrangement but

2 Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes* (GS), 7 December 1965.

rather as a personal and reciprocal commitment. Through an "irrevocable personal consent" (GS 48), the "intimate partnership of married life and love" (GS 48) is established. In this sense, marriage is understood as a personal communion – a comprehensive partnership of life that involves the whole person. This understanding is also emphasized in the Catechism (CCC 1643) and in the apostolic exhortation *Familiaris consortio*.[3] Such a holistic and mutual self-giving entails specific normative implications. When two persons give themselves to one another in this comprehensive way, their relationship is oriented toward permanence and exclusivity. The commitment of the spouses, therefore, implies both a lasting bond – expressed in the indissolubility of marriage – and an exclusive bond, expressed in fidelity. As noted above, this indissolubility is further grounded in the sacramental character of Christian marriage.[4] Accordingly, the Catechism states that conjugal love requires "of its very nature, the unity and indissolubility of the spouses' community of persons" (CCC 1644). The norms of indissolubility and fidelity thus emerge from the very nature of the marital communion; they represent the inner consequence of conjugal love.

It already becomes apparent from these observations that two typological models of argumentation can be identified within magisterial justifications of marriage: a natural law model of justification and a personalist model. Until the Second Vatican Council, magisterial teaching largely relied on natural law reasoning. Since the council, however, a shift in the mode of justification has become evident. A personalist model of justification increasingly came to the fore, a development that is reflected particularly in the emphasis on personal consent discussed above.[5] This development has therefore been described as a "paradigm shift", insofar as the renewed magisterial perspective on marriage and the family represents a qualitative development of earlier teaching.[6] In this perspective,

3 As stated in *Familiaris consortio*: "conjugal love involves a totality, in which all the elements of the person enter – appeal of the body and instinct, power of feeling and affectivity, aspiration of the spirit and of will. It aims at a deeply personal unity, the unity that, beyond union in one flesh, leads to forming one heart and soul; it demands indissolubility and faithfulness in definitive mutual giving; and it is open to fertility (cf. *Humanae vitae*, 9). In a word it is a question of the normal characteristics of all natural conjugal love, but with a new significance which not only purifies and strengthens them, but raises them to the extent of making them the expression of specifically Christian values." John Paul II: *Familiaris consortio* (FC), 22 November 1981, 13.

4 Indissolubility refers primarily to the ontological structure of marriage, whereas fidelity concerns the moral obligations arising within the marital relationship. This distinction is evident in the fact that fidelity may be violated without dissolving the marriage; even in the case of adultery, the marital bond remains in force. Indissolubility and fidelity therefore designate different dimensions of marriage: indissolubility denotes the structural permanence of the marital bond, while fidelity expresses the normative requirement of an exclusive and committed relationship. At the same time, both dimensions are closely connected in the church's teaching on marriage, since each can be understood as an expression of the total personal self-giving that characterizes the marital covenant.

5 See S. Ernst: "Korrekturbedarf gegenüber der Tradition", 138-141.

6 See Martin M. Lintner: *Christliche Beziehungsethik: Historische Entwicklungen – Biblische Grundlagen – gegenwärtige Perspektiven*, Herder, 2023, 188.

the personal dimension becomes an integral component of theological language. At the same time, however, the natural law framework remains clearly present.[7] The personalist approach does not replace the natural law rationale but rather complements it within the magisterial understanding of marriage.

In summary, the ontological-teleological foundation of the church's teaching on marriage rests on several interconnected elements: a reality grounded in the order of creation, a teleological orientation toward unity and fruitfulness, a sacramental participation in the relationship between Christ and the church, and a comprehensive personal commitment between the spouses. Within this framework, the normativity of the church's teaching on marriage derives from the intrinsic characteristics of marriage itself. Moral requirements, therefore, appear as the unfolding or explication of this underlying reality. The ontological structure of marriage is understood as oriented toward certain goods and forms of fulfillment, the realization of which is considered morally good. In the context of marriage, this can be illustrated by the notion of total personal self-giving: if marriage is understood as such a comprehensive gift of self, then permanence, fidelity, commitment, and reliability do not appear as externally imposed demands but as normative consequences of this fundamental characteristic. Normativity thus emerges from the unfolding of the essential structure of marriage. This logic of justification is also reflected in the language used to describe marriage. It is characterized by ontological categories: marriage is understood as a specific reality with an inherent structure that grounds its moral meaning.

3. On Hermeneutical Mediation in Amoris Laetitia

In *Amoris laetitia*, Pope Francis warns that the church's teaching on marriage and the family must not become "the defense of a dry and lifeless doctrine" (AL 59). In doing so, he implicitly points to the risk that an exclusively ontological-teleological framework may fail to take adequate account of the concrete realities in the lives of the faithful. A similar concern is articulated by moral theologian Eberhard Schockenhoff, who argues that Francis's emphasis on the personal dimension is far from marginal. Rather, from the outset, Francis expresses a certain skepticism toward the application of general norms to complex pastoral situations and toward an excessive confidence in deductive reasoning that seeks to derive far-reaching conclusions for every individual case from general principles (see AL 2).[8] This tension between an objective normative structure

7 See Stephan Goertz/Caroline Witting: "Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie? Kontext, Rezeption und Hermeneutik von *Amoris laetitia*", in: Stephan Goertz/Caroline Witting (eds.): *Amoris laetitia – Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie?*, Herder, 2016 (Katholizismus im Umbruch 4), 9-92, 22.

8 See Eberhard Schockenhoff: "Traditionsbruch oder notwendige Weiterbildung? Zwei Lesarten des Nachsynodalen Schreibens *Amoris laetitia*", in: George Augustin/Ingo Proft (eds.): *Zum Gelingen von Ehe und Familie: Ermutigungen aus Amoris laetitia*, Herder, 2018, 282-296, 284.

and the complexity of lived biographies highlights the need for interpretive mediation in moral judgment. It is precisely at this point that the argument of AL begins. Without abandoning the ontological foundations of marriage, the document shifts attention to the hermeneutical dimension of moral evaluation. Conscience, contextual discernment, and pastoral accompaniment are emphasized as essential elements in the responsible application of moral norms. The question of normative justification is therefore not abandoned but situated within a more complex structure of moral knowledge. From a meta-ethical perspective, AL can thus be interpreted as an attempt to preserve the ontological-teleological source of moral norms while also emphasizing their pastoral and hermeneutical mediation within the church's teaching on marriage.

Fundamentally, AL upholds the church's traditional understanding of marriage, as reaffirmed in particular in AL 52-53. At the same time, the document introduces a new emphasis by highlighting the importance of *discernment*, especially regarding the role of context and the responsibility of conscience (see AL 300-306; on conscience, see especially AL 303). For Pope Francis, discernment is a process in which objective norms are applied in light of concrete life situations. In this process, conscience, contextual awareness, and personal responsibility become integral elements of moral judgment, without thereby abandoning the normative framework of the church's teaching. A theologically coherent integration of such discursive sensitivity, therefore, appears possible when it is understood as a hermeneutical exploration within an ontological horizon (see AL 305). In this context, particular importance is given to the principle of graduality. As systematic theologian Julia Knop notes, this principle serves as a theological and pastoral instrument that seeks to do justice to the complexity of real partnerships and family histories in contrast to the schematic application of normative ideals.

Gradualist thinking allows a distinction between the ideal and the norm, on the one hand, and the diverse and often complex realities of partnership and parenthood, on the other, while placing both within a meaningful relationship. In this way, the diversity and dynamic character of relationships can be acknowledged without abandoning the ideal of sacramental marriage oriented toward family life.[9] Consequently, the diversity and dynamism of relationships become integral elements of the process of discernment. As AL states, it would be "reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being" (AL 304). Responsible moral judgment is therefore not understood as mere compliance with rules but as a process that takes circumstances seriously, engages the conscience, and is accompanied

9 See Julia Knop: *Beziehungsweise: Theologie der Ehe, Partnerschaft und Familie*, Friedrich Pustet, 2019, 300-306.

by pastoral care.[10] Generalizations and context-insensitive applications of norms, therefore, fail to meet the demands of discernment.

Pope Francis further emphasizes that "this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized" (AL 303). According to Knop, Francis does not intend any substantial change or softening of the church's teaching on marriage. Rather, he shifts the interpretative horizon of that teaching from a strictly normative perspective toward a life-historical one. In this sense, Francis does not alter the norms themselves but rather their meaning and function within the life of the church.[11] Moral theologian Karl-Wilhelm Merks similarly argues that the papal remarks do not so much change the meaning of individual norms as they modify the broader normative framework within which those norms operate. Moral norms are embedded in complex life histories in which they may function as a supportive orientation but may also appear burdensome or oppressive. For this reason, they require a twofold relativization: they must remain related to the diversity of concrete lives, and the limited regulatory capacity that becomes evident in this relationship must be taken seriously.[12]

10 "For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in 'irregular' situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church's teachings, 'sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families'. Along these same lines, the International Theological Commission has noted that 'natural law could not 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 decisions'." (AL 305)

11 See J. Knop: *Beziehungsweise*, 310-311.

12 This shift is closely connected with Pope Francis's effort to place the moral subject more firmly at the center of ethical reflection. This orientation becomes particularly evident in his emphasis on conscience: His apostolic exhortation reveals in many places the intention to highlight persons as the subject of morality, to encourage and strengthen them. This is done in a striking way through his emphasis on conscience and the moral responsibility of the individual. By placing the moral subject – we might also say the person – at the center of morality, the pope succeeds in relativizing the objective natural order, so dominant in tradition, along with its catalog of seemingly absolutely binding laws. See S. Goertz/C. Witting: "Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie", 90-91. Merks formulates a similar point: The result of a long-standing discussion is a new fundamental morality, at whose center no longer stands a normatively predetermined nature. Instead, the focus is on the subject – the human person and their personal responsibility – which must be exercised in light of the given possibilities within specific personal, social, and cultural contexts of action, and must prove themselves in concrete situations, that is, in the face of life's complexity. This shift in perspective reaches to the very roots of moral reflection. Instead of understanding moral standards and norms as something already established elsewhere (for example in revelation, nature, or social conventions), morality is now understood more as the object of an ongoing process of inquiry – a task entrusted to the human person who asks about the meaning of life and thereby shapes his or her actions. The meaning of a norm therefore becomes apparent only when we reflect, in light of our own experiences, on its possible significance for a just and good human life and for human coexistence. Without such personal understanding, good and evil ultimately remain inaccessible to us as moral realities. Accordingly, hermeneutical mediation is necessary in order to prevent moral norms from merely being followed in a blind or mechanical way and instead allow one to reflect on their meaning within the context of one's own life. As Merks puts it:

From a meta-ethical perspective, this development does not alter the ontological-teleological logic that underlies the church's teaching on marriage. Rather, the norm is mediated hermeneutically. This hermeneutical dimension becomes evident in considering contextual factors, particularly the lived experiences of the faithful within their personal relationships. The normative framework, therefore, remains intact, but it is interpreted more explicitly in light of concrete life histories.[13] This model makes it possible to introduce distinctions without losing sight of the normative standard itself. Although AL highlights the dynamics of relationships and the responsibility of conscience, it does not represent a revision of the ontological-teleological foundation of the church's teaching on marriage. What changes is the mode of application: moral norms are applied through processes of discernment that take into account the complexity of concrete situations. AL, therefore, does not shift the source of moral norms. The ontological horizon remains sacramental marriage, and the normative orientation continues to be provided by the church's teaching. At the same time, however, the appropriation and application of these norms take place through a conscientious process that considers both the contextuality and the dynamic character of relationships. In this sense, one can speak of an asymmetrical mediation between ontological and discursive logics. Discursive elements – such as dialogue, contextual sensitivity, and attention to biographical realities – are incorporated into the process of discernment, while the normative horizon remains ontologically and teleologically structured. These elements function as interpretive instruments that help to uncover, at the level of lived experience, the inner logic of sacramental reality. The experiences of the faithful and the dynamics of their relationships can therefore be understood as concrete expressions of what the ontological definition of total self-giving in marriage implies. They illuminate how sacramental reality takes shape within concrete life situations. The underlying normative logic thus remains unchanged; the aim is rather to communicate existing norms in a manner that is sensitive to context and life experience. As the moral theologian Martin Lintner observes, Francis deserves credit for integrating the developments in the church's teaching on marriage during the twentieth century – particularly the paradigm shift of the Second Vatican Council toward a more personalist understanding of marriage – into a coherent theological framework. At the same time, Francis encourages a pastoral approach that seeks to accompany married couples and families in their efforts to realize the good as fully as possible within

Morality is not something imposed, alien, or coercive, but rather something that is understood, affirmed, and experienced as meaningful. It is therefore inseparably connected with the moral subject and with conscience as the locus of personal responsibility. See Karl-Wilhelm Merks: "Grenzzäune mit Löchern: Über die Allgemeingültigkeit moralischer Normen", in: S. Goertz/C. Witting (eds.): *Amoris laetitia – Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie?*, 177-178.

13 "At the same time, it must be said that, precisely for that reason, what is part of a practical discernment in particular circumstances cannot be elevated to the level of a rule. That would not only lead to an intolerable casuistry, but would endanger the very values which must be preserved with special care." (AL 304)

the limits of their concrete situations. Such an approach requires attentive listening, since couples themselves are best acquainted with their own life circumstances, needs, and challenges.[14]

4. On the Performative Shift in the Context of the Synodal Path

The growing emphasis on discernment as a process that takes biographical complexity and moral responsibility seriously is accompanied by a shift in focus. Moral judgment is no longer understood primarily as the deductive application of general norms but increasingly as a context-sensitive process of moral evaluation. At the same time, contemporary reform debates reveal forms of argumentation in which the quality of concrete relationships – their reciprocity, reliability, and fidelity – becomes the central criterion of moral assessment. From this perspective, the ethical evaluation of relationships is no longer derived solely from the ontological structure of marriage but also from how relational goods are realized in lived practice. Against this background, the following section analyzes the text *Life in Successful Relationships – Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership*, developed within Synodal Forum IV of the German Synodal Path.[15]

This text – drafted, debated, and ultimately rejected within the context of the German Synodal Path[16] – nonetheless seeks, as its title already suggests, to outline key milestones for a renewed sexual ethics in contrast to the classical modes of argumentation in ecclesial moral teaching. The shift becomes particularly evident in the way normative justification is framed. Whereas traditional approaches rely primarily on an ontological-teleological grounding of norms, the text adopts a relationship-oriented evaluative perspective in which the quality of concrete relationships becomes the decisive criterion of moral judgment. This perspective is captured in the notion of *successful relationships*. Marriage, for instance, is

14 See M.M. Lintner: *Christliche Beziehungsethik*, 234.

15 Regarding the Synodal Path, the call for fundamental changes in the church's official sexual morality is one of the central concerns of the Synodal Path reform project. This initiative was launched jointly by the German Bishops' Conference and the lay organization Zentralkomitee der deutschen Katholiken in response to the revelation of cases of abuse within the church and the subsequent scholarly investigation of these cases. See Konrad Hilpert/Jochen Sautermeister: "Einleitung: Irritationen um das Positionspapier des Synodalen Wegs", in: K. Hilpert/J. Sautermeister (eds.): *Kirchliche Sexualmoral vor dem Abgrund*, 9-12, 9.

16 [The text, *Leben in gelingenden Beziehungen – Liebe leben in Sexualität und Partnerschaft*, is translated on the English pages of the *Synodale Weg* website as "Life in Succeeding Relationships…"; a more accurate translation is used here – ed.] The text was first discussed by the Synodal Assembly on 1 October 2021. It had previously been adopted by the Synodal Forum as a draft for first reading in the Synodal Assembly, with 19 votes in favor, 3 against, and 1 abstention. The Synodal Assembly discussed the text in a second reading on 8 September 2022. Although it received approval by a two-thirds majority of the members present, it was not adopted as a resolution because it did not receive approval by the required two-thirds majority of the bishops present from the German Bishops' Conference. See Der Synodale Weg (eds.): *Dokumentation der nicht beschlossenen Entwürfe*, 2024, Status, 59, https://www.synodalerweg.de/beschluesse.

described as a lifelong covenant whose reliability and commitment, emotional closeness, and trusting openness to mutual growth form an important foundation for the success of a life in partnership (see 83).[17] While classical marriage theology therefore operates with categories such as essence, institution, covenant, sacrament, and teleological purpose, the authors of the text employ concepts such as responsibility, reliability, fidelity, and mutual respect. The central hermeneutical key lies in the primacy of love as a normative guiding principle. In clear continuity with the conciliar description of marriage as an "intimate partnership of married life and love" (GS 48), marriage is understood primarily as a personal relationship whose inner meaning is realized in the mutual love of the partners. According to the text, this love becomes concrete in fundamental relational values such as fidelity, mutual respect, responsibility for one another, and loving devotion. These values do not appear as externally imposed norms but as expressions of a successful relationship. Normative orientation, therefore, emerges less from a prior ontological definition of marriage than from the question of whether concrete forms of partnership realize those relational qualities that can be understood as expressions of personal love. In this sense, normativity arises not solely from the derivation of norms from the nature of marriage but from the performative realization of relational values that characterize the flourishing of personal love.

Explicit references to insights from the humanities and social sciences further reinforce this shift. The authors draw on psychological, sociological, and anthropological research on relationship dynamics and incorporate these findings as relevant sources of ethical reflection. The relationship-oriented evaluative logic articulated in the text also becomes evident – much as in AL – in the increased emphasis placed on the role of conscience. Moral judgment is not understood as blind obedience to rules but as a context-sensitive process that engages personal conscience. Accordingly, the text states that it is the task of the church, of the Magisterium as well as of the community of all believers, to accompany one another in this conscientiousness and in responsible living – gently and without patronizing (see 86). With Ernst, one could plausibly speak of a model of moral justification grounded in an ethics of responsibility. Starting from a realistic understanding of human sexuality informed by the human sciences, the text calls for a responsible approach to partnership and love in which moral judgments and decisions must be carefully weighed in light of the specific situation and the persons involved, and in light of central relational values.[18]

When particular attention is given to the normative guiding category of love, the justificatory structure implicit in the text can be described as performative. This perspective, however, does not represent a complete departure from traditional

17 Given the meta-ethical focus of this study, the analysis follows the relational emphasis of the Synodal Path text and therefore concentrates on the quality of interpersonal relationships. The procreative dimension of marriage is not explicitly addressed in this context, although, particularly from the perspective of Catholic doctrine, it remains constitutive for the understanding of marriage.

18 See S. Ernst: "Korrekturbedarf gegenüber der Tradition", 148.

teaching on marriage and sexuality. Rather, the normative point of reference shifts. The ontological structure of marriage no longer serves as the primary basis for moral evaluation but functions instead as a background horizon within which the quality of lived relationships is assessed. The performative logic articulated in the text, therefore, does not stand in opposition to tradition. Instead, it can be understood as developing the conciliar insight that love constitutes the *innermost essence* of marriage. The focus thus moves from the structural definition of marriage toward the ethical evaluation of lived relational practice, guided by the normative category of love.

It is precisely in the primacy of love that a characteristic shift in the mode of argumentation within moral theology becomes visible. Normative reflection increasingly places the flourishing of personal relationships at its center. The normative axis thus moves from the question of objective form – such as sacramental form – to the question of relational quality. Moral evaluation focuses on the contextual assessment of concrete ways of life in light of criteria that characterize successful relational dynamics. At the same time, this shift in justificatory logic also reveals an important limit. When the direction of justification is reversed, and ontology is confirmed only retrospectively, the structure of normative validity itself begins to change. The central point of conflict, therefore, does not lie in the question of whether experience, contextual sensitivity, and dialogue are relevant. Rather, it concerns the status accorded these elements: do they function epistemically, helping clarify and interpret moral norms, or do they become constitutive of their justification? It is precisely at this point that the theological tension of the debate becomes evident. Some participants express the concern that the shift might no longer be understood merely as a hermeneutical deepening – an attempt to translate the ontological meaning of marriage into the categories of successful personal relationships – but as a transformation of the source of normativity itself. This would occur if the quality of the relationship were to become not only an expression of marital reality but the decisive criterion of normative validity.[19]

19 According to Lintner, the text was ultimately rejected primarily for three reasons: (1) The shift in perspective proposed in the text represents a change that cannot be reconciled with the current teaching of the universal church and therefore constitutes a break with it. (2) The understanding of the human person underlying the text is incompatible with the Christian anthropology rooted in Scripture and tradition. (3) Such an approach would also have far-reaching implications for the understanding of sin, grace, and salvation, since it does not sufficiently acknowledge that the freedom to love is always endangered by sin. See M.M. Lintner: *Christliche Beziehungsethik*, 608-612. In light of the bishops' concerns, Laubach examines in his contribution to what extent additional sources of theological insight – beyond Scripture and tradition – may be necessary for forming moral judgments. In this context, he refers in particular to what he describes as a paradigm shift in theological ethics: In the fundamental orientations of theological ethics following the Second Vatican Council, the question of the sources of moral knowledge has undergone a significant shift. Biblical sources and magisterial texts continue to serve as points of reference for theological-ethical reflection and for the search for what is good and right. Yet with regard to the concrete determination and justification of moral norms, a paradigm shift occurred in moral theology during the second half of the twentieth century. Building on the tradition while at the same time developing and deepening it, reason has increasingly come to occupy a central place among the

It should be emphasized, however, that the discursive and evaluative shift found in the text does not constitute a revision of church teaching. The doctrinal framework is explicitly reaffirmed, and the significance of the sacramentality of marriage is strongly emphasized. As the text states, it is precisely the sacramentality of marriage that opens up a space in which human sexuality can be lived in mutually respected dignity and mutually granted love and mercy. Sacraments are "signs and instruments" through which God's saving closeness becomes tangible (see 84). A Christian marriage lived in this way is therefore described as far more than a sexual union. As a lifelong covenant between two believers in Christ, it offers, in its orientation toward exclusivity and unconditional commitment, a reliable sense of security, because it is not subject to arbitrary time limits. It can thus foster trust in a future in which joy and hope may arise just as surely as sorrow and fear (see 83). At the same time, the shift in argumentative logic becomes evident once again. A successful marriage is characterized by love and respect, reliability, and commitment. These relational qualities are presented as the decisive criteria of a flourishing partnership. The argument, therefore, no longer proceeds primarily in an ontological-teleological manner but rather in an evaluative: partners should be faithful not only because fidelity follows from the essential nature of Christian marriage but also because fidelity is constitutive for the success of a relationship. In this sense, sacramentality is described as opening a space within which love can be concretely lived. The performative dimension becomes apparent precisely at this point: normativity arises less from the ontological structure of the sacrament itself than from the relational practices that take shape within this framework. Sacramentality thus functions as an enabling structure for lived love. At the same time, however, the text also explicitly connects

sources of moral knowledge. He therefore argues that moral judgment can be rational only if, as the classical doctrine of the *fontes moralitatis* already requires, it clarifies the object, intention, and purpose of an action, as well as its circumstances. Yet this clarification is possible only through recourse to the sciences, everyday experience, and the realities of life. Without these, practical reason ultimately remains blind. See Thomas Laubach: "Sittliche Erkenntnis im Horizont des Glaubens: Zum Status der Vernunft in Fragen einer christlichen Moral", in: K. Hilpert/J. Sautermeister (eds.): *Kirchliche Sexualmoral vor dem Abgrund*, 100-119. This discourse also reflects the fact that church teaching and theology follow two distinct yet interconnected modes of thought and language which, as Hilpert notes, differ from one another but are also interconnected and influence one another. Characteristic of magisterial teaching is its assertive style and its tendency to formulate issues in propositional statements. Theology, by contrast – and moral theology in particular – operates in a reflexive and discursive manner. This means that theology seeks to justify its claims through argument and to engage critically with reasons both for and against them. Good theology therefore does not merely state "how the world is or ought to be" or how God, humanity, and the world are related. Rather, it reflects on experiences and observations and seeks to understand them more deeply in the light of Scripture and tradition. It asks what can be expressed in concepts, interpretations, and systematic reflection, and how such insights may be articulated appropriately within the context of the present. Its explicit or implicit aim is to arrive at positions that can be regarded as reasonable and acceptable to all competent participants in the discourse. See Konrad Hilpert: "Berufung auf die kirchliche Lehre: Fallstricke und theologische Unangemessenheiten", in: K. Hilpert/J. Sautermeister (eds.): *Kirchliche Sexualmoral vor dem Abgrund*, 41-59, here 56-57.

with the tradition by referring to the values of the church's sexual teaching and sexual pedagogy, which are described as indispensable elements of a sexual relationship lived in dignity and love and as serving the protection of relationships: binding friendship, fidelity, respect, mutual tender affirmation, and the assumption of responsibility in the case of parenthood.[20] Through this performative shift in justificatory logic, the text opens the possibility of greater resonance with contemporary social discourses and thus the opportunity to address what it describes as the discrepancy between the church's sexual doctrine and the lived reality of the faithful (see 61). This orientation is also reflected in the document's language, which predominantly employs evaluative and process-oriented terms to describe successful relationships in terms of their relational qualities.

5. Between Preservation and Development – A Question of Justificatory Logic

The preceding sections have reconstructed three distinct approaches to the justification of moral norms in contemporary Catholic debates on marriage and sexuality: the ontological-teleological model of magisterial teaching, the hermeneutical approach developed in *Amoris laetitia*, and the relationship-oriented perspective articulated in the context of the Synodal Path. While each of these approaches emphasizes different aspects of moral reasoning, they also point to differing assumptions regarding the source, structure, and application of normativity. Against this background, the following section offers a comparative overview of these models from a meta-ethical perspective. Its aim is to further clarify their respective justificatory logics, to render their internal coherence more visible, and to highlight central differences in their underlying assumptions.

(1) The ontological-teleological model of the church's teaching locates the source of moral norms in the structure and purpose of marriage itself. Marriage is understood as grounded in both creation theology and sacramental theology; its intrinsic structure is teleologically oriented, and moral norms can therefore be interpreted as the unfolding of this structure. The direction of justification thus proceeds from being to essence, from essence to *telos*, and finally from *telos* to norm. Accordingly, the ontological-teleological model is characterized by

20 See M.M. Lintner: *Christliche Beziehungsethik*, 613-614. Since the church's teaching on marriage is fundamentally upheld, Lintner critically asks whether it might not have been advisable to emphasize more clearly throughout the document that the proposed shift in perspective does not seek to introduce an entirely new sexual morality but rather builds on values that have long been present in the tradition and that continue to be ethically significant. Likewise, it would have been helpful to outline more explicitly the various paradigm shifts initiated by the Second Vatican Council in the area of teaching on marriage and the family and to build upon them, thereby demonstrating that the proposed shift in perspective fits within the constructive-critical process of receiving the Second Vatican Council. The very real connections to *Amoris laetitia* could also have been highlighted more strongly, in order to show that most of the reflections and proposals are compatible with the Roman magisterium and with the teaching of the universal church.

a high degree of normative clarity and structural coherence. At the same time, however, its limitation lies in the risk that concrete life situations and biographical complexities may not be sufficiently taken into account.

(2) *Amoris laetitia* maintains this ontological source of norms but expands the mode of access to them through a hermeneutical approach. Ontology remains the foundation of moral norms, while the magisterial tradition provides its authoritative interpretation. The application of these norms, however, is mediated through processes of discernment. The direction of justification therefore proceeds from being to norm, and from there – through the discernment of conscience – to concrete moral evaluation in pastoral practice. In this way, *Amoris laetitia* integrates the contextual and dynamic dimensions of relationships into the hermeneutics of moral norms without shifting the ontological source of normativity itself. This approach makes it possible to take the lived realities of the faithful more seriously and to distance moral judgment from a purely deductive application of norms. Discursive sensitivity – such as attention to context, biography, and relational dynamics – is thus incorporated into the process of moral discernment, but it does not become constitutive for the justification of norms.

(3) The performative model of justification, as suggested in the text of the Synodal Path, shifts the normative point of reference more strongly toward the lived practice of relationships, even though the ontological foundation of marriage is not explicitly abandoned. In this perspective, moral evaluation focuses on the extent to which concrete forms of partnership realize relational goods that express successful love – such as trust, reliability, mutual respect, and responsible care for one another. Structurally, this entails a modification in the direction of justification. Normativity is not derived primarily from the ontological structure of marriage but also from the performative realization of relational goods within concrete relationships. The justificatory movement thus proceeds from relational practice to the relational goods experienced within it, and from there to normative evaluation. Norms, therefore, appear less as deductive conclusions drawn from a given structure of being and more as orientations intended to enable and protect the flourishing of personal relationships. This model is characterized by a particularly strong attention to the lived realities and dynamic character of relationships. At the same time, it differs from the hermeneutical approach of *Amoris laetitia*. While the latter maintains the ontological source of norms and mediates their application through pastoral discernment, the approach suggested in the Synodal Path proceeds more directly from relational practice itself and derives its normative orientation, in part, from the quality of these relationships. The potential difficulty of this approach lies in the possibility that the ontological source of normativity may gradually recede into the background if the quality of lived relationships becomes the primary criterion of moral evaluation. In such a case, there would be a risk of an implicit shift in the justification of norms – from a structural ontology toward a performative evaluation of relational practice.

These structural and analytical reflections have aimed to draw attention to the different justificatory logics that shape contemporary debates on marriage and

sexuality. At the same time, they highlight the importance of meta-ethical questions in these discussions, since many existing disagreements ultimately arise from differing assumptions about the justification of moral norms. For the ongoing dialogue within the church, it therefore appears essential to make these underlying rationales explicit and to take the challenges associated with them seriously. Such clarification requires conceptual precision. It is necessary to distinguish carefully between the source of moral norms and their application, between the ontological-teleological structure of marriage and its existential realization in concrete lives. The three models discussed above, for example, do not refer to the same normative level. Magisterial teaching primarily represents the source of norms; *Amoris laetitia* places greater emphasis on their hermeneutical application; and the text of Synodal Forum IV focuses more strongly on processes of normative formation.[21] These differences also correspond to distinct forms of moral reasoning. In the classical model, moral reason is understood primarily as the recognition of an objective order of being and ends. The hermeneutical approach, by contrast, emphasizes the interpretive mediation between norm and situation. The performative model, finally, locates moral rationality more strongly in the evaluation of lived relational practice and in its capacity to realize those goods that constitute flourishing human relationships. The task, therefore, is to make these normative grammars explicit and to clarify their relationship to the lived reality of believers. Only such clarification can enable a genuinely fruitful theological dialogue – one that avoids reducing ontology to ideological rigidity on the one hand or dissolving moral discourse into arbitrariness on the other.

6. On the Theological Opportunity of this Debate

Regardless of which normative grammar one follows, the church's reflection on marriage and sexuality ultimately rests on a shared normative intuition: the importance of indissolubility, fidelity, and mutual respect for the flourishing of a relationship, for the stability of marriage. It is precisely here that the theological opportunity of the present debate emerges. It challenges the church not merely to articulate its teaching in the form of normative boundaries but also to make visible the deeper meaning of that teaching in relation to the flourishing of personal relationships. From this perspective, *successful relationships* can be interpreted as concrete expressions of the personal self-giving that the church's tradition describes as the essential characteristic of marriage. The persuasiveness of the church's sexual ethics will therefore depend, not least, on whether it can demonstrate that its normative commitments do not hinder the flourishing of human relationships but rather help to make such flourishing possible and to sustain it.

21 For a fundamental discussion of normative grammar, see Wilhelm Korff: *Norm und Sittlichkeit: Untersuchungen zur Logik der normativen Vernunft*, Karl Alber, 1985.

The disagreements and tensions that characterize the present debate should therefore not obscure those values of the church's sexual teaching and sexual pedagogy that should be indispensable elements of a sexual relationship lived in dignity and love and serve to protect relationships (see 63). As Hilpert observes, the increased focus on principles and values, understood as criteria, is helpful not least because, from this perspective, the continuities can emerge more clearly.[22] From this point of view, greater attention might fruitfully be given to these positive aims, which can be summarized under the concept of love. Ultimately, the debate concerns the same values, visions, and hopes that are also associated with the concept of sacramental marriage: holistic love, unconditional sharing, commitment and fidelity, and the capacity to grow beyond oneself by creating something new together.[23] For Hilpert, this perspective is one of the decisive aspects when, in the context of debates over the document of the Synodal Path, the necessity of a paradigm shift in sexual morality is discussed.[24] Against this background, the current debate may be understood less as a rupture than as an opportunity to make visible once again the inner orientation of the church's sexual ethics: the promotion and protection of personal relationships shaped by trust, fidelity, and responsibility.[25]

Summary

Three Logics of Normative Justification in Catholic Debates on Marriage

Contemporary debates on marriage and sexuality within the Catholic church – particularly in the context of the German Synodal Path – are frequently interpreted as a conflict between the preservation of tradition and the demand for doctrinal development. This article proposes a different perspective. Rather than treating these debates primarily as disputes over individual moral norms, it analyzes them as expressions of different logics

22 See Konrad Hilpert: "Von der Sexualmoral zur Beziehungsethik: Von der Tragweite eines theologisch-ethischen Perspektivenwechsels", in: Eberhard Schockenhoff (ed.): *Liebe, Sexualität und Partnerschaft: Die Lebensformen der Intimität im Wandel*, Karl Alber, 2020 (Grenzfragen; 44), 41-62, 56.

23 Ibid. 57.

24 Ibid. 54.

25 Such an orientation ultimately also enhances the social relevance of the church's sexual ethics. The transformation of the traditional model of marriage should not be interpreted as a departure from stable and committed partnerships, since these continue to hold great significance for most people. The importance of committed partnership has therefore not diminished; rather, its social forms have changed. The aim, consequently, is to highlight the shared normative expectations that characterize enduring relationships. At the same time, the diversity of contemporary partnership forms must also be taken into account. Increasingly, systemic factors shape the conditions under which marriage and partnership are lived, often contributing to the gap between the desire for stable relationships and the realities in which people actually find themselves. See Anna Karger-Kroll: "Zwischen Wunsch und Wirklichkeit?! Herausforderungen für ein Leitbild von Ehe und Familie im Kontext der Pluralität an Lebensformen", in: Anna Karger-Kroll/Michael Karger/Christopher Tschorn (eds.): *Beziehungsstatus: kompliziert. Das kirchliche Leitbild von Ehe und Familie in Konfrontation mit der sozialen Wirklichkeit*, Herder, 2018 (Katholizismus im Umbruch; 6), 17-40.

of normative justification. The study, therefore, adopts a metaethical approach that seeks to clarify how moral norms are grounded, interpreted, and applied within contemporary ecclesial discourse. The article distinguishes three models of normative justification that structure the current debate. First, the ontological-teleological model of the church's teaching locates the source of moral norms in the intrinsic structure and purpose of marriage itself. Marriage is understood as a reality grounded in creation and sacramentality, whose essential structure gives rise to normative claims such as fidelity and indissolubility. Second, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* introduces a hermeneutical mediation of this normative framework. While maintaining the ontological source of norms, it emphasizes pastoral discernment, conscience, and the contextual complexity of concrete life situations in the responsible application of moral norms. Third, the text *Life in Successful Relationships – Living Love in Sexuality and Partnership*, developed within the German Synodal Path, suggests a performative model of justification. In this perspective, moral evaluation focuses more strongly on the quality of lived relationships and on the realization of relational goods such as trust, fidelity, and mutual responsibility. By comparing these models, the article argues that many current controversies arise less from substantive disagreement about moral values than from differing assumptions regarding the logic of moral justification. Clarifying these normative grammars helps to reframe the debate. It may contribute to a more constructive theological dialogue that holds together ontological foundations, hermeneutical interpretation, and the lived practice of relationships.

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