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Amoris Laetitia: A Turning Point in the Methodology of the Formulation of Magisterial Teachings

1. Introduction

In our contemporary world, on the one hand – as Pope Benedict XVI had rightly pointed out – there is a conspicuous and popular trend that tends to banalize human sexuality and marriage. Thus, there are eloquent voices which demand that any and every type of human sexual behaviour should be (and could be) justified as if in the realm of human sexuality there are to be no objective moral norms. On the other hand, there are the traditional religious and cultural voices that try to uphold the need for objective moral norms in the sphere of human sexuality since this too is an essential area of human behaviour. Among the latter, the Roman Catholic teachings on sexuality and marriage are prominent, and often prophetic. Thus, the fact that the magisterial teachings on human sexuality and marriage have a crucial and indispensable role to play in the lives of the believers in our rapidly changing contemporary world is a given. That these teachings would be a prophetic call to the contemporary world is also well accepted. However, careful observations of the lived realities of the Catholics in the contemporary world would show that there is a growing gap between what the church teaches and what the believers live in reality with regard to sexuality and marriage.[1]

This article is an effort to show that the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (AL) of Pope Francis as a whole is an effort to bridge the existing gap between the magisterial teachings on human sexuality and marriage and the lived reality of believers. In doing so, AL proposes apparently "novel" indications with regard to the formulation of magisterial teachings linked to marriage and human sexuality – indications that would invariably narrow the gap between what is officially taught and what is lived by believers in reality. This paper also intends to demonstrate that, rather than being novel, these indications, in fact, are rooted in the rich Catholic pastoral/moral tradition – indications that had been ignored or overlooked in formulating most of the recent magisterial teachings, especially

1 Survey after survey has revealed this, as was evident even from the feedback to the questionnaire offered to believers in preparation for the two synods on marriage and the family in 2014 and 2015, which paved the way for *Amoris laetitia*. See also Linda Woodhead: "What We Really Think", *The Tablet*, 9 November 2013, 12.

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with regard to human sexuality and marriage. In other words, in re-evoking such traditional indications (that had been conveniently forgotten or overlooked), AL is in fact resuscitating them within the Catholic moral tradition. In what follows, I will highlight some of those indications.[2]

2. *Consultation of the People of God in order to Accord the* Sensus Fidei *its Due Place*

One of the peculiarities in formulating the teachings of AL was the world-wide consultation of all sectors of the People of God through a questionnaire that covered the main aspects of the lived reality of the Catholic understanding of family and marriage. This unprecedented consultation of believers, especially of married couples, was an effort to tap the *sensus fidei* of the believing community with regard to marriage and family life. The careful analysis and the discernment of the responses to that questionnaire was done in and through the episcopal conferences of the local churches spread throughout the world. After all, *sensus fidei* does not refer to the popular opinion on any given issue. But, as Vatican II clearly asserted,[3] "the Spirit-filled community is a bearer of revelation, and its experience of the faith is an authentic theological font".[4] Hence there was the need for each national episcopal conference to further discern the responses that came from the grassroots. These discerned responses from the episcopal conferences eventually were used to formulate the Working Paper or the *Instrumentum laboris* of the synod of bishops on marriage and the family held in October 2014. The functioning of the synod of bishops in 2015 flowed out of the deliberations and discernment of the synod in 2014.[5] Thus, the two synods further discerned the responses to the questionnaire which came through the filtering of the national episcopal conferences, and in the end, as it is customarily done, a list of propositions were delivered to Pope Francis for his final decision, which was expressed through his post-synodal apostolic exhortation, AL. However, while proposing the contents of AL to all believers, in an authentic synodal spirit, the pope apparently left those contents to be further clarified when and where necessary, when he wrote:

> The Synod process allowed for an examination of the situation of families in today's world, and thus for a broader vision and a renewed awareness of the importance of marriage and the family. The complexity of the issues that arose revealed the need for continued open discussion of a number of doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and pastoral questions. The thinking of pastors and theologians, if faithful to the Church, honest, realistic and creative, will help us to achieve greater clarity. (AL 2)

2 As the reader will notice, most of the following sections are interrelated.
3 Second Vatican Council: *Lumen gentium* (LG), 21 November 1964, 12.
4 Avery Dulles: *Magisterium: Teacher and Guardian of the Faith*, Sapientia Press, 2007, 44-45.
5 This was the first time that two synods of bishops followed one after the other (in 2014 and 2015) and exclusively dealt with the relevant themes on marriage and family.

It was this rather laborious synodal process of discernment that prompted the Italian moral theologian Aristide Fumagalli to hold that AL is "a document with synodal characteristics".[6] Also, it was precisely this synodal way of formulating the teachings of AL that made it a unique magisterial document that emanated from the lived realities of the believers. It was formulated by the representative and differentiated involvement of all sectors of the church – the clergy, the religious and the laity, especially married people. Moreover, one should notice that this synodal method of formulating the teachings of AL was distinctly inductive compared to earlier magisterial teachings on marriage and family which comparatively used a rather deductive method in formulating their contents.[7]

In the post-Tridentine period, there arose the understanding of a teaching church (*ecclesia docens*) and a learning church (*ecclesia discens*). The former was identified with the hierarchy of the church while the latter with the rest of the baptized. As Dulles points out, within this understanding, "the hierarchy is credited with active infallibility; the infallibility of the learning Church was regarded merely as passive".[8] This understanding, obviously, suffocated the concept of *sensus fidelium* because the official teaching in the Catholic church was perceived as the exclusive prerogative of the former while the latter had to simply follow what the former taught. However, the methodology of formulating the contents of AL was an effort to link *ecclesia docens* and *ecclesia discens*, without negating the unique and indispensable teaching role assigned to the church hierarchy.[9] That is, this would be to perceive *both* the clergy and the laity as teachers and learners, participating in the formulation of the official teachings according to their differentiated roles as inspired by the Holy Spirit. As Pope Francis had expressed elsewhere:

> A Synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening in which everyone has something to learn. The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth" (Jn 14:17), in order to know what he "says to the Churches" (Rev 2:7).[10]

6 Aristide Fumagalli: *L'Amore in Amoris Laetitia: Ideale, Cammino, Fragilità*, Edizione San Paolo, 2017, 12.

7 Even though John Paul II: *Familiaris consortio*, 22 November 1981, was also a post-synodal document, the formulation of its teachings did not follow such a clear-cut synodal method that involved all sectors of the People of God.

8 Avery Dulles: *A Church to Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom*, Crossroad, 1982, 112.

9 See Second Vatican Council: *Dei verbum* (DV), 18 November 1965, 8-10; LG 24-25.

10 Francis: "Address at the 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.

Such listening to each other by the People of God is obligatory because the Holy Spirit is present in each of the baptized, albeit in diverse degrees and ways. It is in this sense that the *Vademecum* (1.3) for the recent synodal process could say:

> The Second Vatican Council reinvigorated the sense that all the baptised, both the hierarchy and the laity, are called to be active participants in the saving mission of the Church (LG 32-33). The faithful have received the Holy Spirit in baptism and confirmation and are endowed with diverse gifts and charisms for the renewal and building up of the Church, as members of the Body of Christ. Thus, the teaching authority of the Pope and the bishops is in dialogue with the *sensus fidelium*, the living voice of the People of God (cf. *Sensus Fidei in the Life of the Church*, 74). The path of synodality seeks to make pastoral decisions that reflect the will of God as closely as possible, grounding them in the living voice of the People of God (ICT, Syn., 68).[11]

In fact, in his "Accompanying Note" to the final document of the recently concluded Synod on Synodality, Francis re-evoked the synodal method that was used in formulating the contents of AL:

> I take up here with conviction what I indicated at the end of the complex and coordinated synodal path that led to the promulgation of *Amoris laetitia* (19 March 2016): "Not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs." (AL 3)

This way of formulating magisterial teachings in a synodal way (involving all the baptized persons in differentiated degrees, with their *sensus fidei*) rather than a top-down way of a pyramid (wherein only the hierarchy teaches using their exclusive prerogative to teach on their own) is certainly an ecclesial novelty that gives AL its unique standing with regard to all the earlier magisterial teachings on marriage and family.

11 Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops: *Vademecum for the Synod on Synodality*, available at https://www.synod.va/en/news/the-vademecum-for-the-synod-on-synodality.html.

3. Linking Doctrines to Lived Reality

One of the often-heard criticisms of AL has been that it dilutes, if not blurs, the cherished doctrines of Catholic faith. In fact, this has been a never-ending complaint made by those opposed to Pope Francis and his teachings.[12] Even at the consistory of cardinals (just before they entered the conclave to elect a successor to Pope Francis in May 2025), it was reported that there were serious concerns among a few vociferous cardinals about protecting Catholic doctrines and pronouncing/announcing them clearly, as if they were under threat during the papacy of Pope Francis. For example, just before the consistory, Cardinal Timothy Dolan, Archbishop of New York, declared in a television interview on 22 April 2025 that some sectors of the North American episcopate were eager for continuity with the pontificate of Pope Francis in his affective line, but he added that "more clarity in teaching, more refinement of the church's tradition, more exploration of the treasures of the past",[13] was needed. A similar sentiment was expressed by Archbishop Georg Ganswein (the ex-prefect of the papal household and secretary to Pope Benedict XVI and also to Pope Francis) in an interview with the Italian journalist Massimo Franco just four days after the election of Pope Leo XIV, when he said: "I believe that doctrinal clarity is needed now. The confusion of these years must be overcome."[14] The so-called "confusion", caused apparently by the lack of the so-called "doctrinal clarity" (allegedly during the papacy of Francis), invariably refers to Francis's teachings in AL, which is a major teaching document of his pontificate.

It has been my first-hand experience (having worked closely with bishops from various parts of the world, but especially with those of the FABC) that, for many bishops, adherence to doctrines of faith and morals is sufficient for an authentic Christian living. At times, such narrow episcopal attitudes even tend to imply that Christian living can simply be reduced to the upholding of the clearly defined doctrines. But the fact is that no doctrine captures the personal or community's attitude of faith in God. As Thomas Aquinas famously held, "the act of faith does not end in propositions but in reality".[15] The same is said in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "We do not believe in formulae, but in those realities they express, which faith allows us to touch."[16]

12 As has already been mentioned elsewhere, I heard such episcopal complaints that "doctrine cannot change" during the two Synods on Marriage and Family in 2014 and 2015, when I acted as a *peritus* for the bishops of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). This almost amounted to saying that our Catholic faith is nothing but a bundle of doctrines!

13 Rafael Llanes: "The Successor of Francis According to Statements by the Cardinals (Part I)", in: *Zenit: World Seen from Rome*, 29 April 2025; available at https://zenit.org/2025/04/29/the-successor-of-francis-according-to-statements-by-the-cardinals-part-i/?eti=24110.

14 Massimo Franco: "È finita la stagione dell'arbitrarietà: Il passato confuso deve essere superato", in: *Corriere della Sera*, 12 May 2025, 11.

15 "Actus fidei non terminator ad enuntiabile sed ad reum." See Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. I, a. 2, ad 2. Translation mine.

16 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC), 11 October 1992, 170.

Moreover, no doctrine remains floating in the air or fully cut off from our lived human realities! A careful analysis of the cherished doctrines of the church shows us that they have emerged from diverse historical contexts according to the diverse pastoral needs of the believing communities of different generations of believers. They are efforts to express the faith of the believers in their limited human terminology and expressions, and so they are conditioned by the particular socio-historical context within which they emerged.[17] Hence, they are not totally immutable, but they also have a rather dynamic aspect that leads to what is called "doctrinal development".[18] According to Pope John Paul II, such development takes place even with regard to the church's moral doctrines.[19]

Of course, moral doctrines are clear indications proposed by the church to put the gospel values into human living. But they certainly are not equal to the whole truth because, as Pope John Paul II so clearly taught, "every truth attained is but a step towards that fullness of truth which will appear with the final Revelation of God: 'For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall understand fully" (1 Cor 13:12).'"[20] Also, one should not forget that doctrines are meant for living human beings in the here and now. Jesus Christ himself said: "The Sabath is made for man, and not man for the Sabath" (Mk 2:27). The truth expressed by this dominical phrase is often forgotten by some contemporary zealots (Catholic fundamentalists?) in order to impose on believers some of the positive human-made laws of the church that emerged in various historical contexts. They certainly have their validity for believers as a sure and indispensable moral compass, but they should not be applied a-historically or abstractly. However, as AL 36 points out correctly: "At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families. This excessive idealization, especially when we have failed to inspire trust in God's grace, has not helped to make marriage more desirable and attractive, but quite the opposite." One of the distinguishing characteristics of AL is that it tries to apply the church's cherished moral doctrines to the lived reality of the believers. The well-known Indian theologian Felix Wilfred, in discussing the unprecedented opposition to the teachings of Pope Francis from within the church, writes: "But the problem with Francis is that he treads the rough ground of everyday life and enters into the byways and lanes of life. He relates the core of the Gospel to

17 As the well-known church historian Norman Tanner has pointed out, this applies even to some important dogmas such as the Nicene Creed which is so central to Christian faith. See Norman Tanner: "Orthodoxy in Nicaea, Constantinople and Chalcedon", in: *Concilium*, 2014/2, 54-55.

18 For a fine description of the development of doctrine, see John Henry Newman: *An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, ed. Charles Fredrick Harold, Longmans, 1949.

19 See John Paul II: *Veritatis splendor* (VS), 6 August 1993, 4, 27, 28.

20 John Paul II: *Fides et ratio* (FR), 14 September 1998, 2. Then, in 13, the pope says: "our vision of the face of God is always fragmentary and impaired by the limits of our understanding".

down-to-earth realities of life. This is something familiar to him."[21] It is exactly this papal tendency that we notice running through in AL.

Moreover, the authentic Christian tradition has never held that faith can be equated to any set of doctrines, but rather the best of Christian tradition has held that doctrines are the bare minimum through which the believing community expresses (in a limited human way) its faith. That's why recognized theologians have always used doctrines in such a carefully nuanced way that they are linked to the very lives of the people. A few years ago, no less a person than Pope Benedict XVI (formerly, the theologian Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger) himself was reported as having said that Christian faith cannot be reduced to a bundle of doctrines.[22] In an interview with the well-known German monthly *Herder Korrespondenz*, Pope Benedict was quoted as saying:

> Above all, the believer is a person who questions himself, a person who must continually rediscover the reality of this faith, both behind and against the oppressive realities of everyday life. In this sense, the thought of a "flight into doctrine" seems absolutely unrealistic to me. A doctrine that existed only as a kind of natural reserve, separated from the everyday world of faith and its demands, would in some way represent a renunciation of faith itself. Doctrine must develop within and from faith, not alongside it.[23]

In a similar vein, AL 312 is forthright in its appeal to "avoid a cold bureaucratic morality in dealing with more sensitive issues".[24] That is to say that doctrines concerning authentic Catholic morality cannot exclusively emanate from the desk of a theologian who is fully cut off from the pastoral field. It has to emerge from the lived reality of believers, i.e., in and through their efforts and failures to live the gospel values as preached by Jesus of Nazareth. No wonder then that Fumagalli could say: "The original contribution of AL consists in inscribing the magisterial teaching on Christian marriage within the real life of the spouses. The novelty of the contribution of Pope Francis, in continuity with the previous magisterium, is to consider the command to love given by Christ in the concreteness of family life."[25]

21 Felix Wilfred: "What it Costs to Be Pope Francis", in: *Jeevadhara* 53/313 (2023), 66.

22 See Andrea Tornielli: "Il Papa emerito e l'irrealismo della 'fuga nella pura dottrina'", in: *Osservatore Romano*, 27 July 2021, 1, 8.

23 Quoted in A. Tornielli: "Il Papa emerito e l'irrealismo", 8. Translation mine.

24 The original Italian rendering of this phrase is: "impedisce di sviluppare una morale fredda da scrivania", which in English would literally mean "avoiding the development of a cold morality directly from a writing desk". Simply put, it refers to a morality that does not take into account the acting person in his/her concrete situation.

25 A. Fumagalli: *L'Amore in Amoris Laetitia*, 19. Translation mine.

4. Considering Persons above Abstract Norms/Laws

The Italian moral theologian Mauro Cozzoli deftly analyses the crux of what is new in AL when he comments:

> Innovation is not in content but in the structure of morality. "Not in content" means that the novelty is not normative; that is, it does not concern the norms taught by the church. Pope Francis has not changed a single norm, nor excluded any. He is faithful – as he himself says – to the moral doctrine of the church, with explicit references to the moral teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, and his predecessors. However, these do not occupy a prominent place in the document. This reflects the very innovation brought about by Francis: a novelty in the methodological structure of the way of thinking, structuring, teaching, and living morality. *This innovation consists in the axial shift of morality from law to person*.[26]

In AL 305, we read that a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in the so-called "irregular" situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives. A pastor is rather called to look each person in his/her eyes, just as Jesus the supreme pastor did while here on earth. Merely checking whether a person is "regular" or "irregular" was the Pharisaic way of passing on moral judgments as we see in the gospels, the totally opposite attitude from that of Jesus.

This insistence on the person is not a new trend in Catholic moral theology. The study of diverse moral cases in the aftermath of the Council of Trent, especially when various cases of personal conscience were dealt with in the context of the sacrament of reconciliation, is a case in point. For example, according to the patron of Catholic moral theology, St. Alphonsus de Liguori (1696-1787) – himself a casuist – moral theology is more than norms or merely applying norms to particular cases.[27] Rather, it is the person who is surrounded by his/her particular circumstances in a given case that needs to be considered more seriously. Thus, in the context of the administration of the sacrament of reconciliation,[28] Alphonsus writes:

> They say that it is enough for a confessor to have the general principles of morality, because with those they can solve all the particular cases. Who would deny that all cases have to be solved with such principles? But here is the difficulty: the application of principles to particular cases. This cannot be done without an adequate discussion of the reasons that

26 Mauro Cozzoli: "Le Novità in Campo Morale di Papa Francesco", in: *Bioetica* 2-3 (2017), 200. Translation and emphasis mine. See also Vimal Tirimanna: "*Amoris Laetitia*: The Official Catholic Re-discovery of the Vital Importance of Circumstances in Moral Evaluation", in: *Studia Moralia* 56/2 (2018), 9-37.

27 See also Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae*, I-II, q. 94, a. 4 (this is quoted also in AL 304).

28 It should be recalled that moral theology as a separate theological discipline was born in the confessional, during the post-Tridentine period. See John Mahoney: *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition*, Clarendon Press, 1987, 1-36.

> are on either side of the case, and this is precisely what the moralists have done: they have tried to clarify with what principles they must resolve many particular cases.[29]

It is within the same traditional Catholic moral theological spirit that Francis says that each case (regarding civilly remarried Catholics) has to be dealt with individually so that the person in such a case would be the centre of any moral analysis. Thus, in AL 298 we read: "The divorced who have entered a new union, for example, can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment." Then, in AL 300, we read:

> If we consider the immense variety of concrete situations such as those I have mentioned, it is understandable that neither the Synod nor this Exhortation could be expected to provide a new set of general rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases. What is possible is simply a renewed encouragement to undertake a responsible personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases, one which would recognize that, since "the degree of responsibility is not equal in all cases", the consequences or effects of a rule need not necessarily always be the same.

In both the above quotations from AL, we notice that the discernment in such cases has to be both "personal and pastoral".[30] According to Cozzoli, in AL such a discernment done "case by case means person by person":[31] "The individual concrete case is discerned in the 'internal forum' of conscience, in dialogue with the confessor, avoiding both the generalization of the norm, which has no regard for the individual, and the generalization of the case, which universalizes what is valid for the individual."[32]

5. Taking the Lived Contexts Seriously Rather than Being Idealistic

When there is a gap between the ideals proposed by the church and the lived reality of the believers, humanly speaking, there are two possible alternative responses: to condemn those who deviate from the church's ideals/teachings or to begin from where the believers are in reality and encourage them to reach up to what the church proposes (of course with the assistance of God's grace). In AL, Pope Francis has chosen the latter, just as Jesus of Nazareth did in the gospels. In contrast to the methods of formulating the earlier magisterial teachings on

29 Alfonso Maria de Liguori: *Istruzione e Pratica dei Confessori*, in: *Opere Morali Italiane di S. Alfonso Maria de Liguori*, Marietti, 1855, ch. 16, pt. 6 (n. 99), p. 409. Translation mine.

30 See Basilio Petrà: "From *Familiaris Consortio* to *Amoris Laetitia*: Continuity of the Pastoral Attitude and a Step Forward", in: *INTAMS Review* 22/2 (2016), 202-216; https://doi.org/10.2143/INT.22.2.3194501. See also his "Moral Theology as Servant of Discernment: Reflecting on the Call of *Amoris Laetitia*", in: *Gregorianum* 99/4 (2018), 739-758.

31 M. Cozzoli: "Le Novità in Campo Morale di Papa Francesco", 204.

32 Ibid. 204-205. Translation mine.

marriage and family wherein the starting point was the ideals proposed by the church, AL starts from where the people actually are and then finds ways for them to walk towards what the church proposes as the ideal.

The earlier magisterial teachings on marriage had the common characteristic of stating clearly what the church believes and then condemning those who deviate from the ideals proposed by the church. However, in upholding the evangelical truth that "no one can be condemned forever" (see AL 296, 297), AL strives to search for what the church (as the living sacrament of salvation for the world) could do with regard to those who have already deviated from the church teachings on marriage. Consequently, the crucial but unavoidable questions are: Is it sufficient to merely condemn those who deviate from magisterial teaching? Is that all that the church (as the sacrament of salvation) can do in their regard? Or could the church consider seriously the lived realities of her faithful, and begin from there in order to help them reach the ideals proposed by the church? After all, "the Church's pastors are not only responsible for promoting Christian marriage, but also for the 'pastoral discernment of the situations of a great many who no longer live this reality'" (AL 293).[33] The bishops at the synod of 2014 which preceded AL had already said: "In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remarried, or simply living together, the Church has the responsibility of helping them understand the divine pedagogy of grace in their lives and offering them assistance so they can reach the fullness of God's plan for them."[34] In this regard, Fumagalli's comment on AL is to the point: "The truth of love is simply presented not statically as a goal to be reached but as a path to be followed. In the historical condition of men and women, true love is not an ideal state in which one can definitively live on this earth, but rather a gradual dynamism leading to its eschatological fulfillment."[35]

In other words, the fragility of human beings is taken seriously by AL, as we read at the very beginning of chapter 8: "The Synod Fathers stated that, although the Church realizes that any breach of the marriage bond 'is against the will of God', she is also 'conscious of the frailty of many of her children'." (AL 291) Running through AL is what Pope John Paul II had already proposed in his *Familiaris consortio*, 34, some thirty-five years earlier, namely, the emphasis on a gradual growth towards the ideals proposed by the church, i.e., the law of gradualness.[36] For example, with regard to the now rampant phenomenon of "living together", AL advocates starting from where those couples actually are, and then, using the law of gradualness, working towards what the church proposes as the ideal marriage (AL 72-73, 292). This is very different from the earlier magisterial

33 Here, one notices a re-echoing of what Pope John XXIII said in his opening address at the Second Vatican Council: "the Church is both a sure teacher and a tender mother".

34 *Relatio synodi*, 2014, 25.

35 A. Fumagalli: *L'Amore in Amoris Laetitia*, 20. Translation mine.

36 See AL 293-306, under the heading, "Gradualness in Pastoral Care".

approaches of starting from the ideal and making the couples in their concrete reality work towards fitting into that ideal. The same is seen in AL 122 wherein, while upholding the traditional interpretation of Ephesians 5 with regard to Catholic marriage, the document also states: "We should not however confuse different levels: there is no need to lay upon two limited persons the tremendous burden of having to reproduce perfectly the union existing between Christ and his Church, for marriage as a sign entails 'a dynamic process…one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God'."

This is very much in line with one of Pope Francis's cherished principles that reality is greater than ideas.[37] In its formulation it is closer to the Aristotelian-Thomistic gnoseological approach.[38] As Cappelletto rightly points out, the "reality" of which is spoken here is not reality in a metaphysical sense but denotes the phenomenal reality. In other words, the ideas are not the clear-cut mental representation of reality but rather that of "conceptual elaboration" which often ends up in ideology in the negative sense.[39] As such, the pope says: "Realities simply are, whereas ideas are worked out. There has to be continuous dialogue between the two, lest ideas become detached from realities. It is dangerous to dwell in the realm of words alone, of images and rhetoric." (EG 231) This unprecedented magisterial effort to link reality to ideas, especially with regard to marriage and family issues, reaches the desired conclusion when AL 304 says: "It is 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." The pope goes on to teach:

> It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations. 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)

Thus, however much accurately or meticulously one formulates a magisterial teaching, no ideas or norms could ever capture the totality of the lived human reality. This surely is a unique hermeneutical key in understanding the moral theological teachings of AL. The same key ought to be used to understand well what Pope Francis said in addressing the staff and the students of the Alphonsianum in Rome:

> Like Saint Alphonsus, we must always avoid letting ourselves be imprisoned in positions of schools or in judgments formulated "far removed from the concrete situations and

37 See Francis: *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), 24 November 2013, 231-233.

38 See Narciso Cappelletto: "I 'Principi-Guida' di Papa Francesco", in: Giovanni Del Missier/Antonio G. Fidalgo (eds.): *Amoris Laetitia: Il Vangelo dell'Amore, un cammino da intraprendere*, Edizioni Messagero, 2018, 88.

39 Ibid. 88-89. See EG 232.

> practical possibilities" of people and families. Equally, it is necessary to be on guard against an "excessive idealization" of Christian life that is not capable of reawakening "trust in God's grace" (cf. AL 36). Instead, listening respectfully to real situations and seeking together to discern the signs of the presence of the Spirit, which generates liberation and new possibilities, we will be able to help all to journey with joy on the ways of good.[40]

Chapter 8 of AL (which has been badly misunderstood by many, especially by a number of bishops and priests) ought to be read using the same hermeneutical key which is unprecedented in papal teachings in the recent history of the church. In other words, AL apparently realizes that the "one-size-fits-all" solutions cannot be used any longer, especially in the very complex and diverse world in which we live.

6. Aiming at the "Good That Is Possible" Rather Than at the Ideal

One of the distinct characteristics of AL is its concern to earnestly seek how to use Catholic moral theology for saving souls, especially those who have fallen short of what the magisterium teaches on marriage. Traditionally, however, most of the earlier magisterial documents did not go beyond condemning morally evil acts in this regard. But AL is eager to find ways and means to go beyond such condemnations, i.e., to seek ways and means to save those who are condemned. After all, the Lord himself said: "For God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but in order that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:17). Thus, AL's implicit use of the axiom the "good that is possible" is an effort to continue this saving mission entrusted to the church.

According to Bastianel, doing the good that is concretely possible is an ancient moral indication.[41] It was Augustine who introduced into the Catholic moral tradition the axiom *Deus impossibilia non iubet* ("God does not ask of us what is impossible").[42] Since then, moral theologians of different generations have been using this axiom in the pastoral field. Thus, St. Alphonsus, the patron of Catholic moral theology, could write in his *Apparecchio alla Morte*:

> God wants everyone to be saved: "omnes homines vult salvos fieri" (1 Tim 2:4 Vulgate). And he does not want anyone to be lost: "patienter agit propter vos nolens aliquos perire sed omnes ad poenitentiam reverti" (2 Pt 3:9 Vulgate). But he wants us to ask him for the graces necessary to save us; because on the one hand, we cannot observe the divine precepts and save ourselves without the actual help of the Lord, and on the other, he does not want

40 Francis: "Discourse to the Professors and Students of the Alphonsian Academy – Higher Institute of Moral Theology on the Occasion of the 70th Anniversary of its Foundation", 9 February 2020; available at https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2019/february/documents/papa-francesco_20190209_accademia-alfonsiana.html.

41 Sergio Bastianel: "Coscienza e discernimento", in: Salvatore Cipressa (ed.): *La Teologia Morale dopo L'Amoris Laetitia*, Cittadella Editrice, 2018, 80.

42 For an in-depth discussion on this, see J. Mahoney: *The Making of Moral Theology*, 48-57.

> to give us graces (ordinarily speaking) if we do not seek them. Therefore the sacred Council of Trent said that God does not impose impossible precepts, since he either gives us the immediate and actual grace to observe them, or he gives us the grace to seek this actual grace from him: "Deus impossibilia non iubet, sed iubendo monet et facere quod possis, et petere quod non possis, et adiuvat ut possis."[43]

This traditional Augustinian axiom dispels the "all-or-nothing" claim made on ordinary Christian faithful even with regard to their concrete moral lives by some pastors. It realistically tries to take lived reality seriously without diluting the moral ideal proposed by the church. Bastianel tries to explain this particular point when he writes: "The acting subject's radical moral task is the commitment to his/her known real objectivity (in terms of concrete values in his or her specific condition). No one is asked to do the impossible. This also means that, within a given situation, one is not asked to do what is not even comprehensible within it."[44] This axiom becomes all the more vivid when one considers the traditional fundamental moral theological principles. Pope Francis in his *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), 44, reminded the pastors and other faithful that they "must always remember what the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches quite clearly: 'Imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors'". Then, he re-echoes what Pope John Paul II taught in FC 34: "Consequently, without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur" (EG 44). Hence, AL 305 can be forthright in highlighting a cherished Catholic fundamental moral theological point (which is often forgotten), namely, that morality cannot be reduced to either black or white:

> Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that "a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties". The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality.

43 Translation mine. The original Italian version reads: "Dio vuol salvi tutti: 'Omnes homines vult salvos fieri' (1 Tim 2:4). E non vuole che alcuno si perda: 'Patienter agit propter vos, nolens aliquos perire, sed omnes ad poenitentiam reverti' (2 Pt 3:9). Ma vuole che noi gli domandiamo le grazie necessarie per salvarci; poiché da una parte non possiamo osservare i divini precetti e salvarci senza l'attuale aiuto del Signore; e dall'altra Egli non vuole darci le grazie (ordinariamente parlando), se non ce le cerchiamo. Che perciò disse il sagro Concilio di Trento che Dio non impone precetti impossibili, poiché o ci dona la grazia prossima ed attuale ad osservarli, oppure ci dà la grazia di cercargli questa grazia attuale: 'Deus impossibilia non iubet, sed iubendo monet et facere quod possis, et petere quod non possis, et adiuvat ut possis' (sess. 6. cap. 11)."

44 S. Bastianel: "Coscienza e discernimento", 83.

At the same time, we need to keep in mind that reaching moral ideals is not merely our human effort; rather, it is human effort ably supported by God's grace: "The Church has repeatedly taught that we are justified not by our own works or efforts, but by the grace of the Lord, who always takes the initiative. The Fathers of the Church, even before Saint Augustine, clearly expressed this fundamental belief."[45] Moreover, in AL 308 we read:

> At the same time, from our awareness of the weight of mitigating circumstances – psychological, historical and even biological – it follows that "without detracting from the evangelical ideal, there is a need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear", making room for "the Lord's mercy, which spurs us on to do our best".

Commenting on the moral discernment involved in seeking "the good that is possible" in the here and now, Majorano writes:

> Speaking of possible goodness, therefore, does not imply a lowering of the ideal. Quite the opposite: it emphasizes the need to recognize what is actually better (cf. Phil. 1:10) by virtue of the grace that has been given to us in advance. Therefore, the conclusion of discernment should not be absolutized but rather open to the further steps that the one already accomplished makes possible.[46]

Petrà points out correctly that for Francis in AL, "mercy does not measure the person by abstract norms but always interprets the norms *mercifully* without ever losing sight of the concrete reality and the concrete possibilities of persons".[47] This is nothing new. For example, some 30 years ago, the same Augustinian axiom was already expressed by the Italian bishops as follows: "Striving for the fullness of Christian life doesn't mean doing what is abstractly most perfect, but what is concretely possible. It is not about lowering the mountain but walking toward the summit at one's own pace."[48]

7. Applying the Logic of Pastoral Mercy Rather Than the Logic of Mere Human Reason

One of the enduring temptations for some contemporary Catholic moral theologians has been to depend exclusively on human reason. Those who succumb to this temptation (especially those who stress an exclusively deontological moral

45 Francis: *Gaudete et exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 52.

46 Sabatino Majorano: "Coscienza e discernimento alla luce di *Amoris Laetitia*", in: S. Cipressa (ed.): *La Teologia Morale dopo L'Amoris Laetitia*, 70.

47 Basilio Petrà: "Dalla morale dei professori alla morale dei pastori", in: S. Cipressa (ed.): *La teologia Morale dopo L'Amoris Laetitia*, 98. Translation mine; emphasis original.

48 Italian Bishops Conference: *La verità vi farà liberi: Catechismo degli adulti*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995, 919 (as cited by M. Cozzoli: "Le Novità in Campo Morale di Papa Francesco", 205).

theology) tend to become not only over-rationalistic but also legalistic, and they rarely have a place for gospel values, such as mercy.[49] Thus, even some five decades ago, in his *Dives in misericordia*, Pope John Paul II could write:

> The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy. The word and the concept of "mercy" seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it. This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy.[50]

However, Pope Francis's moral and pastoral theology heavily revolve around this central gospel virtue of mercy.[51] Already in his EG, he had highlighted what Thomas Aquinas had taught: "In itself mercy is the greatest of the virtues, since all the others revolve around it and, more than this, it makes up for their deficiencies. This is particular to the superior virtue, and as such it is proper to God to have mercy, through which his omnipotence is manifested to the greatest degree."[52] The entire text of AL is saturated with the central gospel virtue of mercy. In fact, there is a separate section in this document under the heading "The Logic of Pastoral Mercy" (AL 307-312). To explain the reason for his consistent stress on this evangelical logic of mercy, in AL 307, the pope says:

> In order to avoid all misunderstanding, I would point out that in no way must the Church desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God's plan in all its grandeur…A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves. To show understanding in the face of exceptional situations never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being.

Again, the pope goes on to draw attention to the temptation to dilute or even block God's mercy in the pastoral field, when he says in AL 311:

> At times we find it hard to make room for God's unconditional love in our pastoral activity. We put so many conditions on mercy that we empty it of its concrete meaning and real significance. That is the worst way of watering down the Gospel…For this reason, we should always consider "inadequate any theological conception which in the end puts in doubt the omnipotence of God and, especially, his mercy".

49 As AL has highlighted, for Thomas Aquinas, mercy is the virtue around which all the other virtues revolve.

50 John Paul II: *Dives in misericordia*, 30 November 1980, 2. In FR 15, John Paul II writes: "The truth made known to us by Revelation is neither the product nor the consummation of an argument devised by human reason."

51 Elected in 2013 as pope, one of his first acts was to declare a special Jubilee Year of Mercy from 8 December 2015 to 20 November 2016.

52 Thomas Aquinas: *Summa theologiae*, II-II, q. 30, a. 4, quoted by EG 37.

In order to show mercy to those who have fallen short of the ideals proposed by the church with regard to marriage and family life, AL 301 recalls: "The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations." Then, the pope deftly uses these traditional Catholic moral principles and concepts, some of which have been either forgotten or overlooked in recent times. For example, chapter 8 invokes the concept of the Law of Gradualness – first proposed by John Paul II in FC 34 (AL 295, 300, 308), the unique role of God's omnipresent grace in a person's moral growth (AL 305), the mitigating factors of culpability as highlighted in fundamental moral theology, and also by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (AL 302), the indispensable role of a properly formed conscience (AL 37, 303), etc. In the same vein, in AL 301, Francis explicitly speaks of occasions when the freedom of the moral agent to act may be limited by particular concrete situations: "A subject may know full well the rule, yet have great difficulty in understanding 'its inherent values', or be in a concrete situation which does not allow him or her to act differently and decide otherwise without further sin. As the Synod Fathers put it, 'factors may exist which limit the ability to make a decision'."

In AL 296 and 297, Francis bluntly states that "no one can be condemned forever", thus implying God's never-ending mercy especially for those who are sinners. This, in fact, is yet another unique feature that serves as a different starting point in formulating the moral teachings of AL based on primarily on God's steadfast mercy.

8. Assigning the Personal Conscience Its Due Place

The prominent theologians who wrote on Catholic morals, such as Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Alphonsus Liguori, and John Henry Newman (all doctors of the church) assigned a prominent place to a person's properly formed conscience. It is worth noting that the official patron of Catholic moral theology, Alphonsus, could write a "memo" at the very outset of his classic work on conscience which reads: "Take note, dear reader, that I have burned both ends of the candle in giving meticulous consideration to the opening *Treatise on Conscience*. It is the one that begins the path toward all moral theology."[53] Similarly, Newman wrote with regard to raising a toast to the pope: "I shall drink—to the Pope, if you please, still, to Conscience first, and to the Pope afterwards."[54] That's why to act according to one's properly formed conscience is consistently considered by magisterial

53 As translated from the original Latin into English in: Raphael Gallagher: *Conscience: Writings from Moral Theology by Saint Alphonsus*, Liguori Publications, 2019, 7.

54 John Henry Newman: "A Letter Addressed to the Duke of Norfolk on Occasion of Mr. Gladstone's Recent Expostulation", in: *Newman and Gladstone: The Vatican Decrees*, Notre Dame University Press, 1962, 138. In the same letter, page 129, Newman also writes: "Conscience is the aboriginal Vicar of Christ." This latter quotation is cited in CCC 1778.

teaching even today as the most fundamental, indispensable, and supreme moral norm for acting.[55]

However, mainly due to the prevalent contemporary trends of individualism and relativism, most of the recent magisterial teachings have tended to pay only a sort of a guarded reference (which often boiled down to a sort of a "lip service") to this fundamental Catholic belief. Consequently, there seems to have been a lurking fear or suspicion (on the part of the church/pastors) about letting a person act according to his/her properly formed conscience, and thus, take personal responsibility for his/her actions.[56] AL 37 itself makes a rather vague reference to this when it says: "We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations". Majorano explains the point at stake when he writes:

> All this requires moral theology to free itself from its suspicion of conscience and its ability to activate and discern the good to be done. It is a suspicion that lies at the root of casuistry that is concerned with outlining a ready-made response to possible situations, so that conscience has no choice but simply to apply it, thus, finding security. I believe that some of the resistance to *Amoris laetitia* is clear evidence of how much this continues to weigh on pastoral care.[57]

Anyone who reads AL attentively will notice that AL wishes to assign the properly formed personal conscience its due place, and so it is at pains to concretize in the lived reality of Christians (especially in their married lives) the vital role a personal conscience has to play.[58] In fact, this re-evoking of the traditional understanding of the personal conscience as the ultimate moral norm (subjective moral norm) which the acting agent is bound to obey (according to the tradition and the official magisterial teachings), has reassigned personal conscience its due place in Catholic moral theology and pastoral practice. Moreover, according to Catholic fundamental moral theology, all other norms – including the objective moral norms – are there only to assist the formation of personal conscience which ultimately becomes the subjective moral norm that is obligatory in guiding acting in the here and now.[59] This is not a question of moral relativism, as some have

55 See Second Vatican Council: *Gaudium et spes* (GS), 7 December 1965, 16; *Dignitatis humanae*, 7 December 1965, 1-3, 14; CCC 1777-1782, 1790; VS 54, 58.

56 The common belief that prevails even today even within many moral theological circles is that the role of a personal conscience is only to follow literally what the objective moral norms uphold. In such a moral theological vision, the personal conscience has no room at all to allow the acting agent to take personal responsibility for what he or she does. See Enrico Chiavacci: *Il cammino della morale* (interview with Valentino Maraldi), Ancora Editrice, 2005, 36.

57 S. Majorano: "Coscienza e discernimento alla luce di *Amoris Laetitia*", 57. See also Vimal Tirimanna: "The Role of Conscience: Is It Always to Follow the Hierarchical Magisterial Teachings?", in: *Asian Horizons* 10/4 (2016), 668-683.

58 Altogether there are 14 references to conscience in AL, but, for our purposes here, see AL 37, 42, 191-192, 265, 298, 302, 303.

59 For a brief but an excellent description, see S. Bastianel: "Coscienza e discernimento", 78-84.

tried to establish in recent times, but, rather, it is the trust placed in a properly formed personal conscience to choose what is right within a given particular situation, assisted by the Holy Spirit, of course. In this regard Fumagalli writes: "Fulfilling an external norm is not sufficient to judge the goodness of human action; it must correspond to the internal grace of the Holy Spirit. The norm certainly fosters the recognition and practice of the good the Holy Spirit leads us to do, but it does not replace his impulse and his voice."[60]

Moreover, according to magisterial teaching, when it comes to the formation of one's own conscience, it is the acting moral subject himself/herself who is primarily responsible for it. Of course, the others, such as pastors, confessors, parents, teachers, etc., certainly have an important responsibility in assisting persons in the formation of their respective consciences. Yet, in the last analysis, it is the acting agent who must discern things in the here and now, and then act. As Bastianel says: "When it comes to helping others to form their conscience, we cannot cheat the game. After all, it is about helping others form their own conscience. The subject of moral formation is the moral subject himself, not his friend, not even his spiritual advisor."[61] It is in this sense that AL boldly addresses the perennial temptation of pastors to be paternalistic, and thus, be the conscience of those who are entrusted to them: "We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them." (AL 37)

9. Recognizing the Due Competence of the Local Churches

Yet another novelty in the formulation of the contents of AL (and those of other magisterial teachings of Pope Francis) can be seen in the space it gives to each local church, especially in exercising its legitimate teaching role.[62] Ever since the centralization of the Latin church in Rome in the high Middle Ages, there has always been a lingering fear that if the local churches are given such space, then, the unity of the church would invariably be threatened. However, Vatican II perceived such authority of the local churches as promoting respect for the unavoidable cultural differences (the diverse ways of being and doing) in diverse local churches, and as such, this situation would make the magisterial teachings more relevant to local contexts, provided the essential contents of the deposit of faith

60 A. Fumagalli: *L'Amore in Amoris Laetitia*, 66. Translation mine.
61 S. Bastianel: "Coscienza e discernimento", 81. Translation mine.
62 It is perhaps in this spirit that Francis often incorporates the teachings of national episcopal conferences as sources to enhance his papal teachings in almost all of his encyclicals and apostolic exhortations.

are not tampered with.[63] What Vatican II taught about theological inquiry is relevant here, too:

> Theological inquiry should pursue a profound understanding of revealed truth; at the same time, it should not neglect close contact with its own time that it may be able to help these men skilled in various disciplines to attain to a better understanding of the faith. This common effort will greatly aid the formation of priests, who will be able to present to our contemporaries the doctrine of the Church concerning God, man and the world, in a manner more adapted to them so that they may receive it more willingly. (GS 62)

This is a re-echoing of what Pope John XXIII famously said at the opening of the council: "The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way it is presented is another."[64] Following the conciliar teachings, Paul VI expressed his inability to formulate a uniform doctrine that could be applied to all the diverse situations in the world when he wrote: "In the face of such widely varying situations it is difficult for us to utter a unified message and to put forward a solution which has universal validity. Such is not our ambition, nor is it our mission."[65] Therefore, he highlighted the pastoral task of local churches to adapt what the church universally teaches. Of course, contextual adaptations are bound to result in diverse ways of expressing the magisterial teachings, mainly for pastoral purposes. That such diversity is not a threat to the unity of the church was clearly pointed out by John Paul II when he taught: "The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities. It is the reality of many members joined in a single body, the one Body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 12:12)."[66] As such, what Pope Francis says in AL 3 is nothing but a re-echoing of the conciliar teachings along with those of his predecessors:

> Since "time is greater than space", I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does. Each country or region, moreover, can seek solutions better suited to its culture and sensitive to its traditions and local needs. For "cultures are in fact quite diverse and every general principle…needs to be inculturated, if it is to be respected and applied".

63 See Vimal Tirimanna: "Context and Moral Teaching: The Crucial Importance of the Magisterium of the Local Church", in: Antonio Autiero/Laurenti Magesa (eds.): *The Catholic Ethicist in the Local Church*, Orbis Books, 2018, 79-93.

64 John XXIII: *Gaudet mater ecclesia*, 11 October 1962, in: Walter M. Abbott (ed.): *The Documents of Vatican II*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1966, 715. The same truth is repeated in GS 62.

65 Paul VI: *Octagessima adveniens*, 14 May 1971, 4.

66 John Paul II: *Novo millennio ineunte*, 6 January 2001, 46.

The issue of the teaching authority of the local churches (through the respective episcopal conferences) within their respective contexts, especially on various pastoral issues, came up for discussion even at the two recent synods on synodality.[67] This is not anything new in the pastoral practice of the church.[68] But unfortunately, due to the ever-increasing centralization of the teaching authority in Rome in recent centuries, the legitimate competence of the teaching authority of local churches certainly appears today as something "novel".

10. Conclusion

As I already mentioned in the introduction, the reader will have noticed that there is an intrinsic link among most of the sections of this paper. But I had to treat them separately in order to highlight the particular aspects indicated by those sections, even if this tended to give the impression of being repetitious. These peculiar highlights of AL are also the main points emphasized by the synod fathers from all over the world at the two synods on marriage and family that preceded AL in 2014 and 2015. A careful and studious reading of AL would make the reader convinced that all such emphases are not innovations but rather teachings based on some traditional Catholic moral principles and convictions that had remained buried inside the rich patrimony of Catholic moral theology and pastoral practice for decades. It is in this sense that AL clearly marks a paradigm shift in the way Catholic moral/pastoral teachings are formulated.[69] Such a shift is primarily aimed at leading persons towards salvation in our contemporary world, and it is in this sense that the entire methodology of the formulation of the contents of AL differs conspicuously from that of the earlier magisterial teachings on marriage and family.

67 See for example, the final document of the Synod on Synodality (2024), 125; available at https://www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG---Documento-finale.pdf.

68 See Francis A. Sullivan: *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church*, Paulist, 1983, 34-78; A. Dulles: *Magisterium*, 54-57; Vimal Tirimanna: "To Teach Faith and Morals in a Diverse Church, We Must Recognize the Doctrinal Authority of Bishops' Conferences", in: *America*, 25 October 2024; available at https://www.americamagazine.org/author/vimal-tirimanna/.

69 See M. Cozzoli: "Le Novità in Campo Morale di Papa Francesco", 200.

Summary

***Amoris Laetitia*: A Turning Point in the Methodology of the Formulation of Magisterial Teachings**

This year marks the 10th anniversary of the much-discussed Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris laetitia* (AL) of Pope Francis. This article highlights some "novel" characteristics (which it calls "indications") that indicate a clear break-away from the way the previous magisterial documents formed their teachings on marriage and human sexuality. These indications are firmly rooted in the rich Catholic pastoral and moral tradition. They appear to be novel because they had been either forgotten or overlooked in formulating most of the earlier magisterial teachings with regard to marriage and human sexuality. In re-evoking such traditional indications, AL is not only resuscitating them within the Catholic moral tradition, but it also can be construed as an effort to bridge the existing alarming gap between what the magisterium teaches on marriage/human sexuality and the lived reality of believers.

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