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**Pope Francis and
His Predecessors**
*– A Remarkable and
Unremarked Continuity*

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Pope Francis and His Predecessors

– *A Remarkable and Unremarked Continuity*

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On the flight returning from a visit to Africa, Pope Francis was asked if the Church should consider a change in its prohibition of the use of condoms to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS; his response revealed his mind on Catholic ethics, both social and sexual. The question, he responded, is too small. The real problem is bigger, the reality of ‘denutrition, the exploitation of people, slave labor, lack of drinking water.’ While condoms may address a small problem, the greater problem to be addressed is “social injustice” and the systemic violation of human dignity throughout the world. Francis recalled a specious question put to Jesus by a Pharisee: “Master, is it allowed to heal on the Sabbath?” (Matt 12:10). Jesus answered that any one of them would rescue his sheep on the Sabbath and “of how much more value is a man than a sheep” (12:12). ‘Do justice,’ is Francis’ answer, ‘do not think whether it is allowed or not to heal on the Sabbath. And when there are no injustices in this world, then we can talk about the Sabbath.’ Jesus’ response is prophetic and so is the Pope’s. We reflect on his response and its implications for Catholic ethics by first looking at one of its predecessors, Pope Paul VI, on the fiftieth anniversary of his 1967 encyclical, *Populorum progressio*, and then demonstrating how *Amoris laetitia* builds upon it to develop Catholic social and sexual ethics.

1. *POPULORUM PROGRESSIO* AND ANTHROPOLOGY

In the history of Catholic social teaching, *Populorum progressio* stands in a line of great papal encyclicals, stretching from Leo XIII’s

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Rerum novarum through Pius XI's *Quadragesimo anno* to John XXIII's *Pacem in terris*. It provides the most extensive definitions of human dignity and human development and, on that basis, offers a method for doing ethics, both social and sexual. *Populorum progressio* sets forth fundamental violations of human dignity, systemic poverty, dehumanizing working conditions, oppressive disparities of power, and proposes a scale of values from the most basic to the highest values of human dignity. At the most basic end are fundamental human needs, food, water, clothing, shelter, education, and the overcoming of social barriers; then comes recognition of and respect for the equal human dignity of all women and men, and cooperation with them to realize the common good, which includes peace; next comes recognition of supreme values granted by God; and finally comes the highest value, a living faith in God that seeks and promotes a just human community in Christ (21). Material goods that meet the basic human needs are necessary for human dignity but they are neither sufficient nor superior to the highest value of human life, relationship with God in Christ. There is a clear emphasis in *Populorum progressio* on relationship with God as the highest human value, which is not dependent on any lower values but finds in them an essential element of human development and finality. Three years before the publication of *Populorum progressio*, the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, had laid the foundation for a definition of human dignity, and we see its influence throughout.

Gaudium et spes provides a general guide for defining human dignity. It notes 'the moral aspect of any procedure ... must be determined by objective standards...based on the nature of the human person and his acts' (51). The official commentary on the Constitution explains that this principle is applicable to the whole range of human activity, both social and sexual, and is formulated as a general principle: 'human activity must be judged insofar as it refers to the human person integrally and adequately considered.' Mining this conciliar principle, Belgian theologian Louis Janssens constructs a theological anthropology explaining the various dimensions of the human person. The human person is a personal subject (never an object); in corporeality or embodiment; in relationship to the material world, to others, to social groups, and, we add, to self; created in the image and likeness of God; a historical being; and fundamentally unique but equal to all other persons.

Populorum progressio reflects these dimensions in its 'new humanism' (20) and its discussion of authentic development. That the human being is a personal subject and not an object conjures

up freedom as an essential component of human dignity; ‘full-bodied’ (42) subjects follow ‘the dictates of their own consciences informed by God’s law’ (37). The corporeal or embodied nature of the person stresses the integration of bodily, intellectual, and spiritual values without any dualisms. Persons in relationship are central to *Populorum progressio*. They are in relationship to the material world where a just distribution of the earth’s resources is demanded (22, 23); they are in relationship to others (45) and to social groups, and the encyclical demands just relations and solidarity between nations (*passim*); each is in relationship to self and each truly loves her/himself by ‘passing beyond her/himself,’ (42, 82) towards the other and towards God. Relationship to God is at the core of every true humanism (20, 42). Persons are historical beings, in constant evolution from self-centered selfishness to solidarity with others (65) that brings ‘not only benefits but also obligations’ (17). Each person is fundamentally unique but equal to all others (52, 54).

Personal conscience, an essential anthropological and theological consideration in Vatican II’s *Gaudium et spes* (16, 26) and *Dignitatis humanae* (3, 41), is mentioned three times in *Populorum progressio* (37, 47, 83). On the relationship between development and population control, *Populorum progressio* warns against the State’s violation of human dignity by forcibly curbing population growth through immoral means, though it supports the rights and duties of governments to address this issue within their competence while respecting the consciences of parents to decide how many children they will have. It also notes that a married couple must follow ‘the dictates of their own consciences informed by God’s law authentically interpreted, and bolstered by their trust in Him’ (37).

We propose a key question to this text: what determines authentic interpretation, is it individual conscience or the teaching of the Magisterium? Authentic interpretation of God’s law certainly depends on a consideration of the formation of conscience in relation to magisterial authority, but both *Populorum progressio* and *Gaudium et spes* acknowledge the importance of responsible parenthood, the challenges of poverty for realizing responsible parenthood, and the need to make reproductive decisions following a well-formed conscience. Pope Pius XII recognized this reality as well in his famous 1951 speech to Italian midwives, when he taught that a couple could choose not to procreate, even for the duration of a marriage, for ‘serious reasons’ of a ‘medical, eugenic, economic, or social kind.’ Communicating the same message, though in his more down-to-earth way, Pope Francis notes that ‘Some think ... that in order to be good Catholics we have to be like rabbits – but

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no.’ *Gaudium et spes* seems to be in that same line when it notes that, while respecting the divine law, such decisions must take ‘into consideration the circumstances of the situation and the time.’ In addition, humans ‘should discreetly be informed ... of scientific advances in exploring methods whereby spouses can be helped in regulating the number of their children and whose safeness has been well proven and whose harmony with the moral order has been ascertained’ (87). Pope Paul VI’s *Humanae vitae* disrupted this line of theological development in 1968 by its affirmation of the absolute prohibition of artificial contraception.

The second reference to conscience in *Populorum progressio* is on the need to participate in human development and to help the needy, ‘Each man must examine his conscience, which sounds a new call in our present times’ (47). Conscience, in dialogue with community understanding, must read the signs of the times and act ethically on that personal-conscience reading. Virtues play an important part in discerning and acting on authentic development: Faith, ‘God’s gift to [people] of good will,’ helps humans reach their highest value (21); hope, ‘for mutual collaboration and a heightened sense of solidarity’ between nations can overcome racism and nationalism (64); authentic Christian charity must be extended to all (67). The encyclical also emphasizes the virtue of wisdom. We need ‘wise men in search of a new humanism,’ (20) it notes, ‘to take as their own Christ’s injunction, ‘Seek and you shall find.’” Human wisdom is essential for discerning responses to complex questions (85). As we shall see in our analysis of Pope Francis’ *Amoris laetitia*, conscience and virtue are more thoroughly integrated as essential dimensions for defining human dignity with profound normative implications.

One of the factors fashioning human beings is their culture and *Populorum progressio* shows a sensitivity to human cultures. Culture has both negative and positive influences and must be critiqued and correctly integrated into the definition of human dignity and the norms that facilitate its attainment. The encyclical recognizes this tension and the need to be in dialogue with culture to create solidarity among peoples (72, 73). It also enlists science and technical expertise to facilitate authentic development (20), to enter into open dialogue with peoples of different cultures without any demeaning nationalism or racism (72), and to collaborate with all people of good will (83) to seek answers to complex social questions.

2. *POPULORUM PROGRESSIO* AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

Populorum progressio follows *Gaudium et spes* and its summons to the Church to scrutinize ‘the signs of the times’ and interpret them

‘in light of the Gospel’ (GS 4; PP, 13). *Gaudium et spes* judges that “this council has set forth the dignity of the human person and the work which men have been destined to undertake throughout the world both as individuals and as members of society. There are a number of particularly urgent needs characterizing the present age, needs which go to the roots of the human race. To a consideration of these *in the light of the Gospel and of human experience*, the council would now direct the attention of all (GS, 46; PP, 13). This statement stands as a milestone in the development of Roman Catholic ethics because it grounds that theology not only in the Gospel but also in human experience to guide response to urgent needs.

Populorum progressio asserts that the Gospel sheds light on current social questions (2) and helps to interpret them in the light of ‘the signs of the times’ (13). It is unclear, however, if or how the Gospel makes any distinct contributions to improving conditions in the temporal order and if there is any distinction between a Catholic social ethics and a secular one (81). Later developments in Catholic social teaching make explicit the Gospel’s distinct contribution, especially the inclusion of a ‘preferential option for the poor,’ first introduced by Latin American Bishops at their conference in Medellin in Colombia in 1968 and again in Puebla in Mexico in 1979 and later adopted into the corpus of Catholic social teaching by Pope John Paul II in his 1987 and 1991 encyclicals, *Sollicitudo rei socialis* (44) and *Centesimus annus* (36). This principle reflects a unique Christian theological content resting on the Gospel of Matthew 25:31-46.

A second, theological, consideration centers in ecclesiology. *Populorum progressio* indicates that for Catholics, ‘the hierarchy has the role of teaching and authoritatively interpreting the moral laws and precepts’ to work towards development and to improve the temporal order. It adds, however, that ‘the laity have the duty of using their own initiative and taking action in this area – without waiting passively for directives and precepts from others’ (81). These statements claim both too much and too little. The statement on the hierarchy’s role to teach and authoritatively interpret the moral laws of Catholic social teaching fails to account for the natural law tradition, whereby all human beings of good will, through right reason, can know the moral laws and apply them. If this is the case, and the natural law tradition affirms that it is the case, what is the role and function of the hierarchy in the teaching and interpreting process? Two extremes are to be avoided.

First, we must avoid blind obedience to magisterial teaching which assumes that the Magisterium has access to knowledge of the natural law to which other believers have no access. The false

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magisterial teachings on usury, slavery, and religious freedom, more than warrant caution here. Second, we must avoid also total disregard of magisterial teaching, given the promise of the Holy Spirit to guide the Church into all truth. Navigating these two extremes from an ecclesiological perspective calls for religious respect (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25) for noninfallible magisterial teaching. There is debate among Catholic theologians about the translation of the Latin *obsequium*. We translate it as *respect*, others translate it as *submission*, and there is a wide gulf between the two. Respect still appears to us both the more accurate and the more defensible translation. To give the required respect to the teaching of the ordinary *Magisterium* means to give it sincere and honest consideration, to make a sincere and honest effort to overcome any contrary opinion we might have, and to achieve a sincere and honest assent to this teaching. This translation allows for conscientious and legitimate dissent from noninfallible Catholic teaching, both social and sexual.

3. *AMORIS LAETITIA* AND ANTHROPOLOGY

Pope Francis' *Amoris laetitia* is in demonstrable continuity with Pope Paul VI's *Populorum progressio* and earlier conciliar and papal pronouncements on Catholic social teaching and builds on those developments. The human person, it argues, is a free personal subject (never an object) (33; 153), an embodied and corporeal being in whom the bodily, the intellectual, and the spiritual are indivisibly integrated (151), in relationship to the material world (277), to others (187-98), to social groups (222), and, we add, to self (32) created in the image and likeness of God (10), an historical being (193), and fundamentally unique but equal to all other persons (54). There are, however, also fundamental ethical developments in it. In contrast to the traditional Catholic approach to ethical decision-making, Francis emphasizes a relational and spiritual approach. This is especially evident in his emphasis on personal conscience, discernment, and virtue.

In both his first encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* (*EG*) and *Amoris laetitia*, Francis follows *Populorum progressio* by bringing to the fore yet again the Catholic doctrine on the authority and inviolability of personal conscience. Although he clearly affirms objective norms (*EG* 64), he warns that 'realities are more important than ideas' and there has to be an ongoing dialectic between reality and ideas 'lest ideas become detached from realities ... objectives more ideal than real ... ethical systems bereft of kindness, intellectual discourse bereft of wisdom' (*EG* 231). Ideas, he insists, 'are at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis' (*EG* 232).

Francis' teaching on conscience in *Amoris laetitia* is, in our

judgment, one of the central teachings in his Exhortation, and is thoroughly faithful to the long-established Catholic tradition and its teaching on conscience. He judges, correctly, given the negative approach of his immediate predecessors to personal conscience, that ‘individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church’s praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage’ (303) or, we add, of any ethical issue. He quotes Aquinas frequently throughout the document, especially his teaching that the more we descend into the details of a situation, the more general principles will be found to fail (304). The devil, as the popular saying goes, is always in the details. Francis confesses that there is such an ‘immense variety of concrete situations’ that his document, and indeed any ethical document, cannot ‘provide a new set of rules, canonical in nature and applicable to all cases’ (300). The pathway to the ethical solution of any and every situation is the pathway not of passive obedience to some law but of an ‘internal forum’ or conscience decision, an assiduous process of discernment guided by a spiritual advisor and a practical judgment of personal conscience that this is to be done and that is not to be done (300-305). Only such an informed conscience can arrive at ethical truth in any and every situation. Only such an informed conscience decision matches *Dignitatis Humanae*’s teaching: ‘Truth can impose itself on the mind of man only in virtue of its own truth, which wins over the mind with both gentleness and power’ (1).

The place of discernment in ethical decision-making complements the role and authority of conscience and seeks to form and inform it. The emphasis on discernment in *Amoris laetitia* is, we suggest, a distinct anthropological contribution to Catholic ethics, both social and sexual. It is not surprising to find discernment touted by a Jesuit Pope, for it is a central element in the Jesuit tradition, the art of prayerful decision-making following seeing, judging, and acting from a Jesus-perspective. This practice is also clearly advocated in *Populorum progressio*. Discernment, Francis writes, requires ‘humility, discretion, and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it’ (300).

Discernment is much more than simply following absolute ethical norms. It moves us from an ethics of norms to an ethics of virtue, grounded in the virtues of faith, hope, charity, mercy, justice, and prudence, that helps us to see, judge, and act from a uniquely Christian perspective and in a uniquely Christian way. Seeing and judging may lead to acts that follow rules and guidelines presented by the Church or they may lead to the act of challenging those rules and guidelines. Authentic discernment and an informed conscience

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allow for, and sometimes even demand, dissent from magisterial teaching. Discernment and conscience complement one another, then, in a prayerful, rational process from experiencing and understanding to the practical judgment that this action is to be done and that action is not. An *ethical* action is one that follows discernment and the practical judgment of conscience and an *unethical* action is one that is contrary to personal discernment and conscience. Since conscience is a practical judgment that comes at the end of a deliberative process, it necessarily involves the virtue of prudence, by which, according to Aquinas, ‘right reason is applied to action.’

4. AMORIS LAETITIA AND THEOLOGICAL METHOD

The shift from a focus on rules and norms, which has been the predominant focus of Catholic sexual ethics, to a focus on virtue, is a fundamental shift in *Amoris laetitia*. Virtue focuses on the character of a person rather than on her acts, on being rather than doing. Acts are important, of course, since they both reflect and shape virtuous character; virtue produces and manifests itself in virtuous acts. In virtue ethics, however, ethical agents and their characters come first, and their ethical actions come second, action follows being. The focus in *Amoris laetitia* is not on norms and their prescribed acts but on ways of being in the world, being like Jesus in the service of God, spouse, family, neighbor and society, all the while understanding that God’s mercy is infinite if we fall short. Chapter Four of *Amoris*, ‘Love in Marriage,’ is a beautiful reflection on St. Paul’s poetic passage on the nature of true love (1 Cor 13:4-7) and the virtues associated with it. Love is patient, directed towards service, generous, forgiving; love is not jealous, boastful, or rude. There is a focus on the virtues of love (*passim*), mercy (27, 47, 300, 306), compassion (28, 308, 92), reconciliation (106, 236, 238), forgiveness (27, 236, 268) and prudence (262). Prudence is a virtue that guides all other virtues, a *cardinal* virtue around which all other virtues hinge, ensuring that individuals make the right virtuous choice. Aquinas argues that it is an essential prerequisite for the possession of every other virtue. It is not difficult to see how it is an essential hinge around which the practical judgment of conscience and its right virtuous choices turn.

Amoris laetitia acknowledges historical consciousness when it advances John Paul II’s ‘law of gradualness,’ the law that ‘the human being knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth’ (295, 134). This is illustrated best in its discussion of the morality of cohabitation. Nowhere in his Exhortation does Francis condemn cohabitation in blanket fashion.

Contrary to the *Final Report* from the Synods which condemns all cohabitation, he makes a distinction between ‘cohabitation which totally excludes any intention to marry’ (53) and cohabitation dictated by ‘cultural and contingent situations’ (294), like poverty, that requires a ‘constructive response’ that may lead to marriage when circumstances permit it. The Church must never ‘desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur,’ he insists, but aware of all the historical, cultural, psychological, and ‘even biological’ mitigating circumstances, she must also never desist from accompanying ‘with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear’ (307). Acknowledging the law of gradualness, Francis recognizes that some types of cohabitation may be truly loving relationships that will gradually blossom into marriages when circumstances permit. The same law of gradualness may be conscientiously discerned to apply to other ethical issues, communion for the divorced and remarried, for instance.

Running throughout *Amoris laetitia* is the recognition of the anthropological impact of the experience of poverty on relational decisions. Francis offers the example of a couple who cohabit ‘primarily because celebrating a marriage is considered too expensive in the social circumstances. As a result, material poverty drives people into *de facto* unions’ (294). Socio-economic realities have a profound impact on relationships, and this impact is often overlooked in Catholic sexual teaching that proposes a one-size-fits-all approach to ethics. On his visit to the Philippines in January, 2015, a former homeless girl, Glyzelle Palomar, gave a heart-wrenching address to Pope Francis and some 30,000 young people gathered for Filipino youth Sunday. In that address, she burst into tears recounting her experience of homelessness. ‘There are many children neglected by their own parents,’ she told her audience. ‘There are also many who became victims and many terrible things happened to them like drugs or prostitution. Why is God allowing such things to happen, even if it is not the fault of the children? And why are there only very few people helping us?’ Pope Francis responded to her with the profound compassion that has come to characterize his papacy, imploring Christians to learn how to weep in solidarity with those who suffer, especially the most vulnerable in society.

What was left unaddressed in both the Pope’s and the Philippine Bishops’ responses to Glyzelle’s plight, and that of others like her, is the correlation between poverty and homelessness, especially among children. A Guttmacher Institute study indicates that 50% of all pregnancies in the Philippines are unintended and 90% of these unintended pregnancies are due to a lack of access to birth control.

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Only in 2012 did Filipino lawmakers pass a bill for free family planning and access to contraceptives, over the loud objections of the local Bishops who fiercely resisted this legislation. On the flight home from the Philippines, Francis reiterated the Church's stance against artificial birth control and promoted natural family planning (NFP). He also recounted an encounter he had with a young Filipino woman who had seven children and was currently pregnant. He called this irresponsible and commented, 'Some think ... that in order to be good Catholics we have to be like rabbits – but no.' Though we commend the Pope for his advocacy of responsible parenthood, we respectfully disagree with his position that NFP is the *only* ethically legitimate method for realizing responsible parenthood.

Pope Francis has made a concerted effort towards devolution of power from Rome to local Bishops' Conferences. The consultation of the laity before and during both synods shows his commitment also to empowering the laity, the *sensus fidelium*, and what he calls synodality.

Sensus fidelium is a theological concept which denotes the instinctive capacity of *the whole Church* to recognize the truth into which the Spirit of God is leading the Church. It is a charism of discernment, possessed by the whole Church, which accepts a Church teaching to be held in both faith and *praxis*. One of the great debates as the Second Vatican Council's *Lumen gentium* was gestating was about who should be consulted about Catholic doctrine. Vatican theologians argued that it was only the Magisterium who determined doctrine. Conciliar bishops and theologians responded with the more historically accurate claim that the Church's faith was preserved in the faith of *all* believers, lay and clerical together. *Lumen gentium* definitively settled the debate. 'The body of the faithful *as a whole*,' it taught, 'anointed as they are by the Holy One (cf. 1 John 2:20; 2:27), cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith (*sensus fidelium*), which characterizes the people *as a whole*, it manifests this unerring quality when, 'from the bishops to the last of the faithful,' it manifests universal agreement in matters of faith and morals' (12). In the Church now re-emerging from the Second Vatican Council, which is a communion of believers, any effort to evaluate a magisterial teaching will automatically include open dialogue, uncoerced judgment, and free consensus among all believers. Surveys of laity leading up to the Synods and *Amoris laetitia* clearly illustrate the process for discerning *sensus fidelium*.

This discernment is a complex process, which takes time, patience, and a commitment to the kind of charitable dialogue that

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Pope Francis so appreciated at the 2014 Synod and characterized as ‘a spirit of collegiality and synodality.’ Indeed, a defining characteristic of his papacy is the search for a genuine synodality, the ecclesiology in practice of Vatican II that focuses on seriously listening to input from all quarters of the Church, laity and clerics alike, to engage in charitable, honest, and constructive dialogue to discern God’s will and the path the Church must follow to attain God’s will. This requires what both John Paul II and Francis frequently refer to as ‘dialogue in charity.’ Synodality is a central and defining dimension of Pope Francis’ papacy and will open the door to further dialogue and development in the Church.

5. CONCLUSION

There remains much theological-ethical work to be done to draw out the full theological implications of *Amoris laetitia* for Catholic ethics, both social and sexual, but it is clear that Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation will be in the forefront of any future theological development: first, the reinstatement of the authority and inviolability of an informed personal conscience in making ethical decisions leading to ethical and virtuous actions; second, the gradualness of growing into Christian and marital life it defends; third, the emphasis on the virtues of faith, hope, love, mercy, wisdom, and prudence in guiding believers in moral discernment and decision-making. We have no doubt that in *Amoris laetitia* Pope Francis has pointed the way, not to any abrogation of Catholic ethical doctrine but to a renewed, thoroughly Catholic way to approach it.

Memory. The lack of historical memory is a serious shortcoming in our society. A mentality that can only say, ‘Then was then, now is now’, is ultimately immature. Knowing and judging past events is the only way to build a meaningful future. Memory is necessary for growth.

– *Amoris Laetitia* # 193.