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AMORIS LAETITIA: JOY OF LOVE OR SCANDAL OF HERESY?

Introduction

Pope Francis recognized that challenges facing the family were some of the most important issues in the present life of the Roman Catholic Church. He thus dedicated two sessions of the Synod of Bishops (in 2014 and 2015) to questions and issues impinging on family life. Given the widespread consultation and discussion prior to the Synod, the vigorous debates among the bishops attending, and the open attitude of Pope Francis to encourage forthright exchanges, it is not surprising that the post-Synodal Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia, The Joy of Love*,¹ continues to expose very different attitudes towards, and understandings of, church teaching, pastoral practice, canonical legislation, and doctrinal diversity. Francis is not one to desire or accept an illusionary or perfumed understanding of ecclesial life. He does not live in a world of propositional abstractions. He appears to be a pastor who is a practical theologian and pope.

While some might argue that the controversies surrounding the *Joy of Love* are novel, I would suggest that his exhortation and ongoing statements are exposing some key issues and challenges that have gone basically unresolved in the Roman Catholic tradition for twelve decades. The issues surfaced during the upshot of modernism at the beginning of the twentieth-century, emerged again in the decade prior to Vatican II, endured for fifty years after the Council, and strengthened in the debates of the 1990s among the German bishops crystallized in the Kasper-Ratzinger nexus. Now, they present themselves once again. The debated issues cluster around doctrinal development, authority, and the relationship between concrete practical life and canonical ecclesial life.

Some might argue that the perceived transformation is fueled by Francis' personal experiences and the life of the Latin American church. This cannot be denied. However, one should not underestimate the radical shift in paradigms and their expression in cultural life and activity as a deep and powerful source of the changes being witnessed

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during Pope Francis' papacy. Likewise, the resistance to change may have less to do with church teaching and more to do with the demise of the unconscious paradigm from the past that sustained these theological teachings, but no longer has contemporary coinage and persuasive value. Since the paradigm shift is crucial to the argument of this essay, I will address it first. In a second part, I will expose several of the key topics and issues being debated after the appearance of *Amoris Laetitia*.

Amoris Laetitia is a biblically-steeped and profoundly rich theological and pastoral text, which is attentive to the present state of marriage in different global contexts. This article primarily addresses the dramatic debate arising from the synodal discussion on the possibility of divorce and re-married Catholics participating in Eucharistic communion – alluded to in a footnote of chapter 8 of the Exhortation:

Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God's grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the church's help to this end. [To this the following footnote 351 is attached]

In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments. Hence, “I want to remind priests that the confessional must not be a torture chamber, but rather an encounter with the Lord's mercy” (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [24 November 2013], 44: AAS 105 [3013], 1038). I would also point out that the Eucharist “is not a prize for the perfect, but a powerful medicine and nourishment for the weak” (ibid., 47:1039).

In the end, this argumentative conflict should not distract anyone from attending to the enduring insights that *Amoris Laetitia* offers to families and married couples who are striving to live out their daily lives and can sometimes face very difficult challenges and conflicts.

Paradigms make all the Difference

Paradigms are the foundational assumptions upon which the language, thought patterns, and social institutions of every culture rests. They characterize the fundamental way of looking at the world, trying to understand life's experiences, and norming patterns of behavior by which one can live together with minimized conflict. Paradigms primarily work at an unconscious level and therefore are unquestionably assumed to be true. This significantly accounts for their incredible power. When it does happen that one of these paradigmatic assumptions is called into question, the questioner is usually labeled a heretic.² One should never forget that any teaching, doctrine, or interpretation is always sustained by an unconscious paradigm. And this raises an important issue identified by John XXIII in his speech opening the Second Vatican Council, when he distinguished between doctrines of faith and the language and thought patterns in which they are

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expressed.

We are presently living in an age of paradigm shifts. When one lives in an era of a paradigm shift, one might be fooled into thinking that they are frequent and common events. The opposite is the case. Paradigm shifts are rare and extraordinary events. In the West, one can identify as examples of paradigm shifts, the change from a Hebraic to Hellenistic Christianity, the medieval retrieval of Aristotelian thought via Averroes, the inclusion of subjectivity in faith during the Reformation, the development of modern science in modernity, and the present emerging paradigm frequently labeled as post-modernity. The postmodern paradigm replaced a single universal master narrative having to do with the legitimization and defense of multiple narratives. Claims to universal truth are replaced by an affirmation of historical meaning systems. Reliance on dogmatic decrees and doctrinal uniformity are replaced with a solidarity rooted in a common ethical life.

One might legitimately argue that Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI responded to the post-modern paradigm, for the most part, by negatively critiquing its assumptions and principles. Their reaction might be characterized as resistance, opposition, and negation. They perceived postmodernity as inimical to Christianity.

With Pope Francis, who still can be a severe critic of certain dimensions present in contemporary postmodern culture, a different reaction is apparent. Francis chooses the path of listening, accompanying, and discerning. Herein is witnessed the profound Latin American experience present since the Second Vatican Council which Francis brings to his papal ministry.

It is not surprising that Francis turns to the themes of inculturation and contextuality as powerful forces in which the church engages contemporary society. His Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium, The Joy of the Gospel* (2013) evidences Francis' view. *Evangelii Gaudium* (henceforth EG) differs from other recent documents on the church's missionary activity, for example, *Ad Gentes* (Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity) of Vatican II, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Evangelization in the Modern World) of Paul VI, or *Redemptoris Missio* (On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate) of John Paul II. In his Exhortation, pope Francis places more of an emphasis on social and pastoral relevance.

Pope Francis speaks of three settings of evangelization: pastoral care of the baptized, bringing back the strayed (people who have lost the spirit of Baptism), and preaching to those who do not know Christ. Francis challenges the church to leave its buildings and move into society in order to evangelize. This evangelization imperative is essentially a communitarian activity. The mission is accepted by each baptized Christian, but is accomplished in the context of the Christian community. Consequently, mission and communion are interconnected realities.

The communal dimension of mission impels people to be engaged in concrete life, especially among those who are suffering, marginalized, or estranged. In EG no. 49, pope Francis declared

I prefer a church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a church concerned with being at the center and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.

In addressing the decennial gathering of the Italian Church Leadership in Florence Italy on November 10, 2015, pope Francis made what may be his clearest assessment of the paradigm shift referenced above. At the convocation, Francis presented a comprehensive vision for the future of the Catholic Church. He spoke of a community that must be deeply merciful and unafraid of change. He affirmed that Catholics must realize that “we are not living in an era of change, but the change of an era.”³ The pope continued:

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addressing the problems facing the church it is not useful to search for solutions in conservatism or fundamentalism and the restoration of obsolete conduct and forms that no longer have the capacity of being significant culturally. Christian doctrine is not a closed system incapable of generating questions, doubts, and interrogatives; rather it is alive, knows being unsettled, and living.

Francis proposes that the Christian community in facing this change of an era should listen, accompany, and discern. He believes this process aligns much better to the challenges posed by the shift to a postmodern paradigm. This process is inductive rather than deductive. It addresses real concrete situations rather than abstractions. It at least recognizes that there are potentially many various life situations that give rise to many narratives and stories rather than one universal, univocal, permanent, and fixed master narrative.

Amoris Laetitia engages the renewal of marriage and the family within the context of a postmodern culture. It overtly recognizes that in the real world marriage and family are rooted in multiple narratives or stories that are varied by and within cultures. The exhortation takes seriously the uniqueness of cultures and this uniqueness counts. Merely returning to old abstract solutions to deep challenges involved with marriage and family is minimally insufficient, if not a dereliction of true pastoral care. Authentic pastoral care is rooted in an encounter with Jesus mediated by the community and the Scriptures. *Amoris Laetitia* recognizes the unique authority of an individual’s conscience. Pastors must walk with couples and families where they are, listening, accompanying, discerning, and evangelizing, while always proclaiming the mercy of God.

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Amoris Laetitia is itself the fruit of a very intensive global listening process. The Extraordinary Synod of 2014 reflected on the challenges of marriage in the family, which then informed the agenda for the 2015 Synod. Pope Francis himself modeled this listening

activity during the synod by his attentive presence in all its sessions and their discussions. In doing this, Francis, showed that listening to the faithful and to his brother bishops was a key part of his own teaching and pastoral ministry.

Amoris Laetitia emphasizes the need for the ecclesial community to accompany families as members in the community of the church. “Accompanying” calls for more than passing on church doctrine and teachings, even though this duty is not to be abandoned. Francis calls for a change in pastoral style - ministers must take on the smell of the sheep. Taking on the smell of the sheep suggests bi-directionality. One direction is the minister going to the flock, being with the poor and estranged among them in a special way. The other direction is the flock mediating to the minister their experience of the Gospel and custodianship of the rich tradition that is alive in their customs, rituals, and cultural traditions.

Amoris Laetitia strongly emphasizes that the ministry to families and married couples must help them grow in the art of discernment. One crucial element in discernment is the formation of conscience. In *Amoris Laetitia* no. 37, Francis insists that pastors must

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make room for the conscience 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.

When addressing new bishops who were completing their training course at the Vatican in 2017, Francis elaborated on his understanding of discernment. He noted:

discernment is a remedy for the immobility of “it has always been so” or “we take time”; it is a creative process that is not limited to the application of methods; it is an antidote against rigidity because the same solutions are not good everywhere.

He urged them not to be imprisoned by the nostalgia of having only one answer to apply in all cases. He warned the bishops that to have an easy one-size-fits-all answer threatens to make our lives dry up. Francis explained that discernment requires humility and obedience:

humility with regard to your own projects, obedience with regard to the Gospel, the ultimate standard, to the magisterium who guards it, to the norms of the universal church which serve it, and to the concrete situation of people.

Francis noted that bishops need to cultivate an attitude of listening, growing in the freedom to give up your point of view (when it is partial and inadequate) to assume that of God’s. A bishop’s listening is a community action. Listening “is necessary because the bishop’s discernment is always a community action”; it does not disregard the richness of the opinion of priests and deacons and of the people of God and of all those who can offer a useful contribution.

Discernment is “born in the heart and mind of the bishop in his prayer, when he meets people and situations entrusted to him with a Divine Word pronounced by the Holy Spirit.” “Only in the silence of prayer can one learn the voice of God, perceive the traces of his language, access his truth.” Francis explained that bishops and leaders in the church must strive to grow in the kind of discernment that dialogues with the faithful in a patient and courageous accompanying process.

As proposed earlier, I believe Pope Francis is the first pope since Paul VI to become positively engaged with the paradigm shift that is a real part of cultural life in many global venues. Francis embraces an inductive rather than deductive method. He explores the concrete cultural context, rather than abstract universal schemas. He

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understands that there is no one universal invariable story, but multiple stories that are always concretely situated. He gives priority to loving merciful action, rather than doctrine and dogma. In short, Francis understands that the church faces enormous challenge in how to appropriately articulate its faith experience once again, but now in new and possibly pluralistic ways. It is not surprising that conservative church leaders, teachers, and pastors who wish to hold on to the earlier unified system, would find pope Francis’ approach to be minimally challenging and maximally heretical. In some conservative quarters and individuals of the Catholic ecclesial communion, one finds this negative critical reaction expressed explicitly, publicly calling into question and rejecting some of the teaching in pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation.

The Synods of 2014-15 and *Amoris Laetitia*

The most intense debate among the bishops at the Synod on Marriage and the Family, as well as the post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, centered on the question of whether divorced and remarried Catholics who lacked annulment could receive communion, even though their marital situation might be canonically irregular. There were clearly divisions on this question among the bishops in attendance, although it was an unequal distribution. Generally on questions concerning divorced and remarried participation, the liberals who favored communion had the two-thirds majority of votes and a little less than one-third negative votes from the conservatives who opposed communion.

Pope Francis tried to temper some of the conservative argument before the synod by empowering local bishops to make judgments concerning an annulment in particular cases. The conservative side also jockeyed for pre-synodal influence when Cardinal Pell and twelve other Cardinals sent a letter to Pope Francis expressing their concern about the process of the synod, about who would be composing the final draft, and about the topics the bishops would address. Nonetheless, the Synod of Bishops carried on its work to the end and produced a final document that

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encouraged continuing discussion of how divorced and remarried Catholics could, without an annulment, participate more deeply in the life of the church.

Pope Francis' final speech during the synod is quite telling. He remarked that discussions, had laid bare the closed hearts which frequently hide even behind the church's teachings and good intentions, in order to sit in the chair of Moses and judge, sometimes with superiority and superficiality, difficult cases and wounded families.

Francis continued in saying that the synod experience "also made us better realize that the true defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but it's Spirit; not ideas, but people; not formulas, but the free availability of God's love and forgiveness."

By focusing on the debate surrounding chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*, specifically on the topics of conscience and discernment, the different paradigms (modern and post-modern) are illustrated and the differing theological conclusions deriving from them become more understandable. Specific theological positions and conclusions actually do flow from the unconscious assumptions upon which they rely. Chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* has become a much-debated question among many Episcopal Conferences around the globe. How is the church to respond to the situation of divorced and remarried Catholics who have not secured a decree of nullity? *Amoris Laetitia* (nos. 298-303) recognizes that discernment and conscience are two crucial dimensions engaged in this complicated and challenging process. Interestingly, in the abstract there is little if no opposition to embracing the ideas of mercy and forgiveness for those who are divorced and remarried. Issues arise when one leaves the world of abstraction and deals with this particular couple and their reality. In the abstract, all bishops agree that accompaniment and understanding are the appropriate Christian reaction. However, when the question of Eucharistic communion for the divorced and remarried is raised, those working out of the modern paradigm are usually vigorously opposed to access to communion and even accuse of heresy those who would allow communion.

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Amoris Laetitia revisits the unresolved conflict manifested during the synodal sessions of 2014 and 2015. During the synodal sessions and in the Apostolic Exhortation, Francis did not finally settle the question by papal fiat. Rather, he embraced his desire for increased synodality and decision-making at the level of national Bishops' Conferences as the appropriate decision-making bodies for the actions of the local church. Furthermore, one might argue that the debates themselves at the synod reflect the conflicts and arguments present during the papacies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Furthermore, they continue the issues and conflicts surrounding *Humanae Vitae* (1968), which themselves continue the theological tensions present during the Second Vatican Council. Now, however, Pope Francis seems disinclined to defend the universal, abstract, univocal

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paradigm of modernity, and is challenging the church to look afresh at the questions, now with a heart of mercy. The church is truly facing the change of an era and must live and act within it. Let us now turn to the conscience and objective-subjective ethics conflicts.

The Conscience Debate

The understanding of conscience seemingly underlying *Amoris Laetitia* reflects a revisiting of the theological vision of conscience formulated by moderately progressive moralists immediately prior to the Second Vatican Council and advanced until the papacy of John Paul II. Some representatives of this interpretation were Louis Janssens in Leuven,⁴ Josef Fuchs⁵ and Bernard Haring⁶ in Rome, and Richard McCormick⁷ and Charles Curran⁸ in the USA. Some current exemplars of this vision of conscience would be Cardinal Cupich⁹ in the USA, Cardinals Kasper and Marx in Germany, as well as Professors Michael Lawler and Todd Saltzman (Creighton); in this current also the bishops of the Buenos Aires Pastoral Region in their September 05, 2016 directive that was tacitly approved in a letter by Pope Francis. Additionally, several German dioceses as well as the diocese of Braga in Portugal have recently endorsed the possibility of communion for the divorced and remarried in certain circumstances.

Alternatively, most of the opposition to *Amoris Laetitia's* implicit understanding of conscience seems to follow the vision of conscience present throughout the writings of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Some exemplars of this vision of conscience who have reacted to *Amoris Laetitia* would be the following Americans - Cardinal Burke, Archbishop Chaput of Philadelphia (who has been appointed the head of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops Committee for the Implementation of *Amoris Laetitia*), Cardinal Pell of Australia, George Weigel (Ethics and Public Policy Center, Washington D.C.), and Matthew Schmitz (editor, *First Things*). Beyond the US, one might mention Joseph Shaw (Oxford University, England), representative of forty-five Catholics requesting the College of Cardinals to avoid possible heresy in *Amoris Laetitia*; and let us not forget the thirteen Cardinals who signed a letter addressed to Pope Francis during the synod, and the sixty-two scholars who issued a filial correction to Francis in 2017.

Wherein lies the root conflict in these two apparently conflicting interpretations of conscience? E. Christian Brugger (*Catholic World Report*, Sept 20, 2016) and Lawler/Saltzman (*National Catholic Reporter*, Sept 7, 2016) offer accurate summaries of the two differing positions. Brugger endorses the more conservative interpretation in line with John Paul II, Lawler/Saltzman¹⁰ align themselves with Pope Francis' seemingly more liberal understanding. Lawler/Saltzman defend the inviolability of conscience. They argue that this was a central tenet established by Thomas Aquinas and definitively affirmed at Vatican II in *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) and *Dignitatis Humanae* (On the Dignity of the Human Person). They argue that one's understanding of the relationship between the subjective and objective dimensions of morality underpins one's understanding of conscience and its relationship to truth and/or magisterial teaching. Lawler/Saltzman argue in this manner:

is conscience subjective and internal, and truth objective and external, whereby the subjective and internal conscience must obey and conform to the objective and external truth? Or does conscience include both the objective and subjective realms, whereby conscience discerns and interprets its understanding of objective truth and exercises that understanding in the subjective judgment of conscience?

In a certain sense, this characterization expresses the difference in the modern versus post-modern paradigm discussed earlier. Lawler/Saltzman embrace the post-modern position. In so doing, they abandon the modern paradigm which claims to understand universal permanent truth that is always valid apart from any concrete situation. For this view, context is ultimately unimportant, although it might diminish culpability. Lawler/Saltzman reject any proposal or criticism that their position leads to relativism.

In this formulation, truth exists “in myself,” not in a relativist sense that denies objective and universal truth, but in the sense of the intrinsic human dignity of the person and the authority of conscience. Conscience must internalize the values reflected in the norm, see their relevance to the human person in all her particularity, and go through the process of understanding, judgment, decision, and action.

The Lawler/Saltzman position might best be characterized as dynamic relationalism. Conscience lives in the drama of experience, discernible laws and patterns, community relationships, history, tradition *et cetera*. Lawler/Saltzman do, however, insist that there is an important role for “objective norms.” They refuse to collapse conscience into the objective norm or create an equation of objective norm and conscience.

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The essential point for conscience as object-orientation is the relevance of the objective norm from the perspective of the inquiring subject in light of the understanding of all the circumstances in a particular historical cultural context. The implication of this perspective on the relationship between conscience as object-orientation and objective norms is that conscience should be guided by those norms, but the authority of conscience is not identified with whether or not it obeys the objective norm.

Interestingly, Lawler/Saltzman appeal to *Dignitatis Humanae*'s horizon on religious liberty to support their claim. They argue that *Dignitatis Humanae* advocates for religious freedom, where “every man has the duty, and therefore the right, to seek the truth in matters religious in order that he may with prudence form for himself right and true [objective] judgments of conscience, under use of all suitable means.” This claim would be oxymoronic if mere obedience to objective norms was the sole role of conscience, for then a conscience that leads people to follow religious traditions other than the Roman Catholic Church could never be tolerated. The religious pluralism recognized and affirmed in *Dignitatis Humanae* shifts authority from the objective norm to conscience as object-

orientation. Informed by objective norms, the hermeneutical lens of the conscience as subject-orientation facilitates the process of understanding, judgment, and decision of conscience.

Lawler/Saltzman claim that this hermeneutical perspective resonates with the fundamental perspective expressed earlier in Bernard Häring's work. In the context of Häring's overall approach to moral theology, God calls all women and men and each person to a moral life. In the person's response to this call, their conscience must be free and inviolable, and "the church must affirm the freedom of conscience itself." Church doctrine is at the service of women and men in their sincere conscience search for goodness, truth, and Christian wholeness. Conscience is not at the service of doctrine. Louis Janssens expressed a concurrent position that conscience was the supreme authority of the human person - properly understood. A different couple might arrive at a different conscience decision. In the above view, the conscience of a divorced and remarried couple after prayer, discernment, attentiveness to church teaching, *et cetera*, may find itself led by the Spirit of God to fully participate in Eucharistic communion. Clearly, there are different concrete narratives and conscience can arrive at different conclusions in each story.

Dr. E. Christian Brugger, the J. Francis Cardinal Stafford Professor of Moral Theology at St. John Vianney Theological Seminary, Denver, argues the perspective flowing from the modern paradigm. He has issued a strong negative critique of Lawler/Saltzman as well as the Argentine Bishops. He argues that any account of conscience that sets it in opposition to freedom (Saltzman and Lawler) or makes it indifferent to objective truth (Argentine bishops) has misconceived, not only conscience and moral truth, but human nature, the doctrine of creation, and the Christian moral life. Brugger begins by rejecting proportionalism that he claims is presumed in the Lawler/Saltzman argument. He represents proportionalism this way: "common to all proportionalists is the *insistence* that intending evil as an end or means (what defenders refer to variously as "pre-moral evil," "ontic evil," "disvalue," *et cetera*) does not by that fact make an action morally wrong. If there are "morally relevant circumstances" justifying the commission of the evil—what they call "proportionate reasons"—then it can rightly be chosen. He continues, "proportionalism denies the existence of intrinsically evil actions, types of behavior that when freely chosen always constitute a disorder of the will. If there are no intrinsically wrongful types of action, then the church, when it has taught that there are intrinsically wrong actions (e.g., adultery), has taught illicitly. And so, whereas according to the church's teaching, conscience *never* rightly deliberates over whether or not to have sex with someone other than one's valid spouse, conscience in the proportionalist account may indeed (in fact, sometimes, must) remain open to it. Why? Because if there are proportionate reasons for doing so, then under the circumstances it may be the *right thing for me to do*."

Brugger claims that conscience in the Catholic view does indeed stand in obedience to the moral law. But this obedience is not servile and passive, not the obedience of a slave to the master. It is the obedience of a scientist to the truth, or a famished man to a feast, or the ear to sound and the eye to color, or an explorer to his longed-for destination, or of a hunting dog to his quarry. Conscience is made for moral truth. It searches for, finds,

probes, and understands more deeply, then directs action as best as it can in accord with it. How can this be a threat? Is a hand a threat to the glove, or a key to the lock? A healthy conscience does not close us down and restrict us. It opens us up to the good and ultimately to God. It makes possible the flourishing of the gift of freedom. Brugger is embracing the argument of John Paul II, expressed in his *General Audience*, August 17, 1983, and *Insegnamenti*, VI, 2 (1983), 256. Furthermore, Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (On the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World) expresses this same perspective, being wholly rooted in both the truth of sexuality and marriage as taught by the church and the obligation of the laity to obey that truth. Interestingly, almost nowhere in *Familiaris Consortio* does the church's teaching on the inviolable primacy of individual conscience, even in sexual matters, appear. One might argue that such an absence unjustly ignores the long-standing Catholic tradition fundamentally strengthened at the Second Vatican Council, and that Pope Francis rightly retrieves this long tradition in *Amoris Laetitia*.

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When the opponents of Francis and *Amoris Laetitia* issue their *dubia*, filial corrections, and suggestions of heresy, they almost always reference the teachings of John Paul II and notably his teachings in *Veritatis Splendor* (The Splendor of Truth). Not surprisingly, *Veritatis Splendor* is his strongest rejection of post-modernity as inimical to Catholicism, threatening to morality, and a harbinger of ramped up relativism. Within a modern paradigm, this is completely consistent; within a postmodern paradigm, it seems inconsistent and narrow-minded. And, as has happened on the practical level of faith life, it may be ignored as inconsequential. The teachings of the modern church may seem strange and foreign to the faithful living in the postmodern paradigm.

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Concluding Suggestions

The differences between the postmodern and modern paradigms is irresolvable. There simply is no middle ground. The beliefs and first principles that constitute the basis for a paradigm are non-negotiable, and they are usually uncritically accepted as true. Perhaps it is best not to endeavor an illusory resolution of this fundamental conflict. It might be much more fruitful to understand how the paradigms operate and why they lead to particular theological conclusions. Time will tell which paradigm survives and thrives and which falls by the wayside within various cultural contexts, because it no longer makes the ambiguity of life's experiences sensible in that place and time.

Second, as is frequently the case when ecclesial conflicts are understood, they are less debates about theology and more about philosophy and cultural horizons. And in its own way, the debate about chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia* reminds us of the debate surrounding

real Eucharistic presence with Berengarius of Tours. The philosophical understanding of what constitutes the real presence was not shared in common. Therefore, the parties to the conflict misunderstood each other's theological position. Today the situation is further complicated by the need to avoid what might be understood as an unconscious theological imperialism. In this case, the beliefs and convictions of one culture are imposed on another, since the imposing culture is considered to be better or higher and in possession of the truth. Western culture must not impose its theological convictions on Asia, Africa, South America, or vice versa, especially when it comes to theological teachings about marriage and family which are always culturally particular and situational.

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Third, the church should surrender any idea that unity must have uniformity. And with postmodernity, the church must struggle to learn how to live with pluralism. It may be that practices surrounding marriage in the family will not allow a one-shoe-fits-all mentality. While there has always been legitimate plurality present in the church, in our present cultural times this plurality may be more diverse and normative.

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Fourth, conscience should always be thought of in the concrete local practical context. Conscience is the place where any individual is with God within the ambient of the loving merciful Christian community.

Fifth, and finally, church leaders and theologians passionately concerned with the church's tradition and teaching as well as practical judgments in pastoral ministry would do well to apply the practice of listening, accompanying, and discerning to their own debates and disagreements. While it might be necessary to articulate the errors one finds in another's argument, it is also beneficial to affirm what is perceived as meaningful and good. *Amoris Laetitia* is a rich theological and pastoral document that strives to support and encourage families who are living in both an era of change and change of an era. As local Episcopal Conferences formulate guidelines for their concrete application, we can all be enriched and stretched, but only if we first listen.

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Background Material

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