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# From Vatican II to *Amoris Laetitia*: The Catholic Social and Sexual Ethics Division and A Way of Ecclesial Interconnection

*Do Vaticano II a Amoris Laetitia: a divisão entre ética social e sexual católica e um novo caminho de interconexão eclesial*

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## Abstract

This paper navigates the development of ethical issues during Vatican II and the impulse to develop a new moral theology just after the Council. This paper argues, on one hand, that *Gaudium et Spes* develops a new moral theology based on the imperative of conscience mediated by faith in issues of social ethics. On the other hand, the old moral orientation was preserved on sexual ethics. After the council, these two moral faces have led magisterial teaching to two different paths that can be seen chronologically in approaches used for issues of social and sexual ethics. Vatican II encouraged a new moral theology, visible in social ethics in the years immediately following the Council. But the same spirit was not embraced by the Magisterium on issues of sexuality until the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* with its ecclesiology of pastoral discernment.

## Resumo

O artigo navega pelo desenvolvimento das questões éticas durante o Vaticano II e o impulso para o desenvolvimento de uma nova teologia moral imediatamente depois do Concílio. O texto argumenta, por um lado, que a *Gaudium et Spes* apresentou uma nova teologia moral com base no imperativo da consciência mediada pela fé em relação as questões éticas sociais. Por outro lado, a antiga orientação moral foi preservada quando diz respeito às questões de ética sexual. Depois do Concílio, essas duas faces morais guiaram o ensino do Magistério por dois caminhos diferentes que podem ser observados cronologicamente nas perspectivas usadas para responder questões éticas de caráter social e sexual. O Concílio Vaticano II encorajou uma nova teologia moral, visível na ética social nos anos posteriores ao Concílio. Mas o mesmo espírito não foi abraçado pelo Magistério quando as questões eram de moral sexual até a publicação da *Amoris Laetitia* com sua eclesiologia do discernimento pastoral.

## Keywords

*Gaudium et Spes*.  
*Amoris Laetitia*, Catholic social teaching.  
Moral theology.  
Conscience.  
Social justice.  
sexual ethics.

## Palavras-chave

*Gaudium et Spes*.  
*Amoris Laetitia*.  
Ensino social católico.  
Teologia moral.  
Consciência.  
Justiça social.  
Ética sexual.



## Introduction

In Vatican II's documents, moral issues are basically presented in *Gaudium et Spes: The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* (VATICAN II, 1965). This document discusses ethical issues in two directions: one is about the Church and her relationship with secular modern society and another is about internal questions in the Church that have been challenged by this society. In a narrow perspective for focusing our debate, we can generally characterize these two directions, framing moral theology as a discipline: *social ethics* and *sexual ethics*. Therefore, I will briefly examine the development of ethical issues during Vatican II, specifically difficulties inherent in debating some of the moral issues in this assembly, and the impulse to develop a new moral theology just after the Council, which was grounded on the imperative of conscience mediated by faith. I will present the Council Fathers' treatment of moral themes amid tensions and controversial issues. Their discussions led to different emphases on issues in which the *old moral theology* was kept on topics such as sexuality, family, and procreation; and a *new moral theology* that began to be developed before Vatican II gained prominence in debates connected to social issues in the modern world.

I suggest that, on the one hand, *Gaudium et Spes* develops a new moral theology based on the imperative of conscience mediated by faith in issues of social justice and the Church's relation with the modern world. On the other hand, heads of the Church retained the old moral orientation on issues of sexuality with a clear option allowing for papal judgment regarding a new orientation on procreation in the future. After the Council, these two moral faces have led theologians to two different avenues of reflection that can be seen chronologically in the way that themes of social justice and sexuality have been treated. The first is the development of a moral theology grounded on human conscience, mediated by faith, which is attentive to challenges of *the signs of the times*. The second is the return of the natural law as a foundation of moral teaching, especially regarding issues of sexuality. This paper argues that the Spirit of Vatican II encouraged a new moral theology that had been

visible in issues of social justice in the years immediately following the Council, but the same spirit was not embraced by the Magisterium on issues of sexuality until the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) in 2016. Stressing the necessity of pastoral discernment and the role of conscience for moral decision in complex situations (AL 37), Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation returns to the spirit and teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* in which the role of conscience and an anthropology that considers the dynamism of reality were central to approach moral issues.<sup>1</sup> The Vatican II perspective on moral conscience as an imperative mediated by faith and *the signs of the times* is still the spirit to examine moral challenges in our current times irrespective of whether they concern social ethics or sexual ethics.<sup>2</sup>

To show the different approaches used by Church's documents to address issues of social ethics and sexual ethics from Vatican II until *Amoris Laetitia*, I divided this essay into three parts. First, I will present some aspects and controversies during the council, especially around the preparations for the GS and on the topic of procreation. Second, I will present the development of social ethics comparing Catholic social teaching and liberation theology, examining their tensions, differences, and complementarity that contribute to the development of Catholic social ethics following the doors opened by *Gaudium et Spes*. This will permit us to see the different road that Catholic sexual ethics took after Vatican II that now *Amoris Laetitia* suggests a return. Therefore, in the third part, I will examine the issues around procreation, family and its challenges, considering the pastoral approach suggested by

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<sup>1</sup> In a recent article, Todd A. Salzman and Michael G. Lawler suggest that *Amoris Laetitia* relates questions of social justice and sexual ethics. This creates an anthropological and methodological integration of Catholic social and sexual teachings. According to them, the methodological division between social ethics and sexual ethics - that were visible, for example, in the distinct methodologies used in *Populorum Progressio and Humanae Vitae* - "is bridged in Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*" (SALZMAN and M. G. LAWLER, 2018, p.635-636).

<sup>2</sup> This distinction between social ethics and sexual ethics (also known as sexual morality) is not absolute. It properly works in didactic terms, but not so when one addresses some specific issues, such as those in which a challenge in terms of sexuality is also a social problem. For example, when the debate regards pre-marital sex is connected to teenage-pregnancy, high vulnerability to STD infections, and lack of education because of poverty and social marginalization. In this paper, I examine these two Catholic moral areas in order to see the different approaches used by the Magisterium in addressing these areas since Vatican II, and also the difficulty to make connections between both areas of morality.

*Amoris Laetitia*, which aims “to promote a genuine culture of discernment in the church” (KELLY, 2016, p.923).<sup>3</sup>

## Moral Issues and Vatican II

Many achievements of Vatican II were possible because of theological and pastoral efforts for renovation before the Council. Such efforts found support and voices during the Council visible in the three main axes chosen by the Council Fathers: liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), biblical studies (*Dei Verbum*), and ecclesiology (*Lumen Gentium*). The same thing did not happen in moral theology, so Vatican II did not present an exclusive document on morality, but rather joined moral issues in *Gaudium et Spes*, which many consider to be a moral theological text. In this text, the Catholic Church presents a new posture of dialogue with the modern world, including its transformations and challenges. However, unlike other areas, movements for renovation in moral teaching did not find great support in the Council. Immediately after Vatican II, Phillippe Delhaye, who participated in the preparation of moral topics for the Council, affirmed the scarcity of moralists in favor of new tendencies and the expert bishops there had taught exegesis and dogma (DELHAYE, 1972, p.60).

During the council preparations, a commission had been created to elaborate a framework of moral topics to be debated at Vatican II. Many controversies followed the work of this conference until the adoption of a particular framework. For example, it is well known the debate between the Jesuit Franz X. Hürth, a defender of a traditional vision of matrimony based on

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<sup>3</sup> Conor Kelly suggests that the “*Amoris Laetitia*’s account of conscience and discernment” has several implications for the role of moral theologians within Catholic communities. He suggests that this account challenges moral theologians “to promote a genuine culture of discernment in the church” (KELLY, 2016, p.923). I borrowed this idea from him to agree with the task he suggests to moral theologians in leading the promotion of this culture, and to add that the genuine culture of discernment seems to be part of the goal of Pope Francis’ text. He wants an entire church that trusts in God’s grace and follows His pedagogy: “Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church’s pastoral care” (AL 78).

procreation, and the Redemptorist Bernard Häring,<sup>4</sup> a supporter of a personalist approach inside conjugal love.

In the sessions elaborating *Gaudium et Spes*, especially on the topic of social ethics, relations of the Church with the secular society, and issues of sexuality and family, Vatican II innovated with an anthropological and personalist vision of human dignity. This was possible because of the self-examination of the Council Fathers about the Church's mission in the modern world. In terms of moral theology, *Gaudium et Spes* presented a major innovation and a shift of perspective regarding the interpretation of Christian moral life. The heart of *Gaudium et Spes* was the relationship of the Catholic Church and the modern world, called to read the signs of the times in light of the Gospel. This has become an essential theological concept to discern the historical Church ministry in the world in different contexts and times. GS inaugurated, therefore, a new orientation for the Christian community's moral interpretation and commitment.

According to Marciano Vidal, this new orientation can be summarized in six directions (VIDAL, 2012, p.122-130). First, it is *epistemological* in which the foundations are the Gospel and the human experience (GS 46). Second, it is the *theology of the signs of the times* presented in the *Gaudium at Spes*, numbers 04 and 11. Vidal affirms that this document opted for an intuitive methodology in which the Church listens to historical facts (VIDAL, 2012, p.126). Third, it is the *moral conscience*. *Gaudium et Spes* no. 16 states:

In the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience. Always summoning him to love good and avoid evil, the voice of conscience when necessary speaks to his heart: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law written by God; to obey it is the very dignity of man; according to it he will be judged. Conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a

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<sup>4</sup> Häring was one of the main theological minds in the Council in matters of moral theology. James Keenan affirms that his anthropology shapes Vatican II and adds: "Häring is the secretary of the editorial committee that drafts *Gaudium et Spes*... and is referred to as 'the quasi-father of *Gaudium et Spes*.' We see his style throughout it. The anthropological vision is based on the human as a social being. Moral issues are not treated as primarily individual, but rather as communal and even global" (KEENAN, 2013, p.172).

man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths (GS 17).

It is a holistic vision of the human being, that is, an anthropology of the totality of the person that goes beyond a law and the knowledge of moral duties. While belonging to a personal being, the conscience is understood as an expression of human dignity and being faithful to it, unites all people, Christians and non-Christians.

Fourth, by omitting *natural law* from the final text, *Gaudium et Spes* abandons this category. It is not an abandonment in the sense that natural law is not important, but in the sense that it needs to be properly situated in history. Fifth, it is the *dialogue* with human knowledge, especially the sciences, in order to offer new languages for a cooperative way. Finally, it is *humanization* as a Christian moral criterion. In other words, Christian morality must lead the human being to act for what makes him more human, according to his own dignity. So Christian morality has the mission to present a proposal that can illuminate and guide human activity in the world toward full human realization (GS 35 and 40).

This anthropological and personalist perspective, marked by a deep historical sense, is present in all Vatican II's documents and has influenced moral theological reflection and magisterial documents since then.<sup>5</sup> However, this influence has taken different directions, especially when we look at social ethics and sexual ethics. Now let us see the different roads taken by these areas of Catholic ethics.

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<sup>5</sup> See James Keenan's article on "Vatican II and Theological Ethics" in which he shows the development of theological ethics promoted by theologians from different parts of the world continuing the legacy of *Gaudium at Spes* in its anthropological perspective centered in the essential role of conscience for theological ethics and moral choices and decisions. This development was attentive to the different realities and their challenges. Theologians engaged in searching for ways to address the new challenges using GS as source and inspiration. This allows the growth of theological ethics that received new contributions from different parts of the world, such as the Latin American contribution that brought the option for the poor to the ethical discussion (KEENAN, 2013, p.162-190). The dynamism of Catholic theological ethics among theologians presented by Keenan was not followed by magisterial teaching in the same way regarding issues of sexuality and family, with a dismissal of the role of conscience presented by *Gaudium et Spes* and the return to natural law in the ecclesial documents until *Amoris Laetitia*.

## Catholic Social Ethics and Liberation Theology After Vatican II

Catholic social ethics is best represented by Catholic social teaching (CST). From Vatican II until now, Catholic social teaching (O'BRIEN; SHANNON, 2010) has been very productive, and many foundational texts have been issued from the pope's chair. Liberation theology appeared on the Church scene after Vatican II, primarily as a result of the Church's application of the council's documents in Latin America, and then it gained its own form as a new way of doing theology from a historical praxis. If we compare CST post-Vatican II development and liberation theology as a new way of doing theology, we can see how both, with particularities and different approaches, have used Vatican II innovations and spirit in the context of social justice.

*Gaudium et Spes*, as well as all the documents of Vatican II, do not only inspire fruitful efforts on Catholic social ideas from the side of the Petrine Magisterium, but also theological production has been dynamic all over the world. Moreover, local bishops and episcopal conferences embraced this spirit of dialogue and collaboration right after the Council. Without doubt, the Latin American Bishops, gathered in CELAM's meetings,<sup>6</sup> were the portion of the Catholic Church that showed tremendous dynamism in embracing the Spirit of Vatican II and in applying its ideas in the Latin American context. The Conference of Medellín (1968) had the goal to adapt Vatican II innovations in the Latin American context (CELAM, 2005). Even sometimes among tension, this adaptation of Magisterial social teaching has been encouraged by the Vatican.

From Medellín to Puebla in 1979 (CELAM, 2005), many socio-ecclesial experiences were strengthened in Latin America, and heads of the Catholic Church in Rome positively approached this ecclesial and theological phenomenon. Social documents issued by Pope Paul VI, such as *Octogesima Adveniens* (1971) and *Evangelii Nuntianti* (1975), provided magisterial support

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<sup>6</sup> CELAM is the Spanish/Portuguese acronym for Conferência Episcopal Latino Americana (Latin American Episcopal Conference).



to the Latin American Church's social engagement for justice. Liberation theology was systematized by theological productions from many theologians, such as Gustavo Gutiérrez, who wrote *A Theology of Liberation* (GUTIERREZ, 1971), and Leonardo Boff, who published *Jesus Christ Liberator* (BOFF, 1972). Furthermore, *the preferential option for the poor* became the heart of this historical praxis of basic ecclesial communities (BOFF, 1977) in Latin America and liberation theology as well.<sup>7</sup> This option was assumed by the Magisterium, first by John Paul II (*Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1987, 39) and recently by Francis (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, 198).

CST's and liberation theology's theological and social perspectives are grounded on Christian foundations, assuming Vatican II's perspectives and spirit by embodying its anthropology and historical approach to read reality. Both address issues of social justice, are concerned about the poor, and are inspired in the prophetic ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. Both CST and liberation theology are experienced within the same broad Catholic Church and want to spread the Good-News of the kingdom of God in the world. However, they have different perspectives about main concepts, and they approach social, moral, and ecclesial issues with different methodologies. I argue that the origin of differences between CST and liberation theology is a foundational element of methodological and practical characteristics. In other words, CST approaches social and ecclesial reality *from above* and liberation theology *from below*. These two approaches are not contradictory. Rather, they complement each other in many aspects (e.g., CST provides magisterial and theological foundations for liberation theology, and this new way of doing theology challenges CST to assume new perspectives and reflections). Justice and peace in a world of solidarity is their common goal. However, the way they approach reality and faith leads to different theological reflections and social and ecclesial practices. I will briefly present these different approaches.

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<sup>7</sup> James Keenan affirms: "From Latin America, liberation theology brings to theological ethics the option for the poor as a response to oppressive suffering... With the irruption of the poor in liberation theology comes the irruption of suffering as a central concern for theological ethics" (KEENAN, 2013, p. 180).

Catholic social teaching is a teaching *from above*. (Here I want to be clear; I am not using *from above* in a pejorative way.) That is, it is a teaching that comes from the official voice of the magisterium, particularly from the pen of the successor of Peter. CST assumes a methodology that begins from a theoretical presentation. It recaptures Catholic tradition, praising what had been said before in other documents and its relevance for all times. Then an analysis of social facts in the present reality takes place in the document. This analysis usually follows a philosophical way of developing arguments and presenting social concerns. It is very abstract, which is a characteristic of papal documents. Although CST presents social elements of reality based on observing temporal social conjectures, it does not use sociological mediation as a constitutive part of its method. Some texts, such as *Populorum Progresso* (1967) and the recent encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015), use sociological tools to understand the reality. But others prefer a theological analysis of social reality grounded in traditional theological and philosophical views, such as *Caritas in Veritate* that uses a Thomistic reference to understand political and social conjectures.

Although the main corpus of CST from papal documents has this methodological aspect from above and is grounded on texts from the magisterial tradition, Pope Francis' apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, and encyclical, *Laudato Si'* have some particularities that introduce new elements into this Catholic social tradition. I highlight three particularities of Francis' texts that are characterized by a posture of partnership to find answers to concrete problems of different realities. This desire of partnership is also visible in *Amoris Laetitia*. First, the teaching in these documents integrates voices from the worldwide Catholic Church. In his texts, Pope Francis does not only quote other papal documents, but he also presents references of episcopal conferences from several parts of the world, such as the Philippines, Brazil, and the USA.<sup>8</sup> For instance, when Francis affirms that the preferential option for the poor is an option of "our Christological faith" (EG 198) he is quoting the

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<sup>8</sup> To check this easily and concretely, you only need to see the footnotes of *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*.

2007 CELAM's document of Aparecida (CELAM, 2007, 392). Second, Francis also stresses in a positive and practical way, a dialogue with sciences, the secular world, and non-Christian traditions (LS 3 and 14). He makes this clear in his encyclical *Laudato Si'* by reflecting on ecological concerns in which he uses secular and scientific sources (LS 17-61), and even quotes a Muslim mystic<sup>9</sup> to emphasize the human responsibility to care for environment, our common home. These two aspects reveal the introduction of a concrete openness to learn from the non-Catholic world. The third of Francis' particularities concerns the way he addresses social justice issues, that is, in partnership with the poor. Besides the option for the poor, he emphasizes the crucial importance *to be with the poor* and *to learn from them* (EG 198 and 199; LS 149 and 179). It is a dialogical perspective that matches Francis' proposal of a poor Church and a Church of the poor that collaborates with the world to empower the poor, to protect the vulnerable, to care for nature, and to promote justice and peace.<sup>10</sup>

Liberation theology is *from below* because it is among the poor. It is *from below* because of the irruption of the poor in history<sup>11</sup> and liberation theology is the irruption of their voice in theological reflection. Liberation theology is from the perspective of the poor and their experience of faith and liberation. This theology neither denies nor dismisses other theological approaches to the Christian faith. It approaches all aspects of this faith from the perspective of the poor and their historical praxis. Hence, liberation theology is not one more theological discipline, but rather it is a new way of doing theology that re-reads all theological disciplines and traditional aspects of faith from the perspective of the poor. This is what Sobrino does in his Christology. He reflects on Christological dogmas from the "perspective of the victims of history in Latin America" (SOBRINO, 2001) just as Leonardo Boff reflects on the Trinitarian mystery from the experience of God-Trinity of the

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis refers to the Muslim mystical Ali al-Khawwas at the no. 233 of *Laudato Si'*.

<sup>10</sup> This dialogical perspective is in the way that Pope Francis writes *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Laudato Si'*. One can notice it in the inclusion of texts from Episcopal Conferences from several parts of the world (e.g. EG 15, 32, and 191; LS 14, 38, 41, and 85), of secular scholars (e.g. EG. 229 and LS 85 and 105,), contemporary theologians (e.g. EG 83 and 93; and LS 149), non-Christian mystical (e.g. LS 233), and wisdom from indigenous peoples (e.g. LS 146) and the poor (e.g. EG 198 and LS 144 and 158). In addition, Francis clearly states his dialogical perspective: "I would like to enter into dialogue with all people about our common home" (LS 3).

<sup>11</sup> On the irruption of the poor in history, see: GUTIÉRREZ, 1981, p.107-123.

poor gathered in basic ecclesial communities (BOFF, 1988). Therefore, liberation theology, even being *from below*, is a dialogue with the Christian theological tradition.

Catholic social teaching and liberation theology have different approaches to address social issues from a Christian perspective. As I said before, they are not contradictory, but they complement each other. One has a universalist aspect and another is more contextual. One presents the voice of the ecclesial authority and another reflects the voice of the poor. CST is the fruit of Catholic Church tradition as a magisterial concern about social injustice. It attempts to move the Catholic Tradition into a social justice setting in order to show the good-news of Jesus Christ. It provides principles that challenge liberation theology to translate them into a historical praxis in a concrete reality marked by poverty and oppression. The dialogue with the poor is the way to begin this translation and, why not say CST inculturation in the reality of the poor? On the other hand, liberation theology challenges CST to make itself humble by hearing the voice of the poor. It challenges the ecclesial authority to be among the poor, to listen to the poor, and to speak as a master who walks with the poor, the privileged recipients of the Gospel (Luke 4:16-18), in their historical reality. CST and liberation theology have different approaches and methodologies, but both want to promote justice and peace in the world.

The dynamism of social realities and the development of liberating approaches to answer concrete, contextual social issues have challenged the social ethics taught by the Catholic Church. This has contributed to the development of CST that has been open to understanding the signs of the time of the social realities. Methodological, one can say that CST is an ongoing construction in history. The path of Catholic sexual ethics followed a different methodology, which has created a tension between the approach offered by *Gaudium et Spes* and the sexual ethics presented after the Council.

## Procreation, Family, and Its Challenges

On the one hand, there is this rich debate, sometimes tense, in social ethics in which the Magisterium and contextual theologies and theologians have engaged in a deep dialogue and in social activism in the Spirit of Vatican II. On the other hand, in the area of sexuality and family, we have not seen the same development between the Council and pre-*Amoris Laetitia*, which does not change any doctrine, but promotes its development (KEENAN, 2017, p.199). Dividing the time after Vatican II into two moments, between (1) the Council and the Synod on the Family (4-25 October 2015) and (2) after the publication of *Amoris Laetitia* (March 2016), I will present the sexual ethics offered by the Magisterium in the first period that went in an opposite direction from the innovation proposed by GS. Then, I will examine the return to Vatican II's anthropology, historical view, and the role of conscience promoted by Pope Francis.

The distance between the Magisterium and innovative theological reflection inspired in the Spirit of Vatican II has had significant implications. This tension is especially about procreation, a topic that was already tense in the Council, led by Paul VI and supported by conservative Cardinals (e.g. Cardinal Ottaviani). The Council did not review the traditional orientation about this issue. The Council Fathers opted for repeating the traditional instruction and waiting for new studies before providing a final word on this issue. What *Gaudium et Spes* expresses on procreation (no. 51) seems to be a rupture with the anthropological perspective of the document, including its perspective on conjugal love.<sup>12</sup> It delegated to the magisterial authority a

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<sup>12</sup> In the no. 49, for example, GS presents the conjugal love as a human reality that promotes the human dignity for the good of the whole person: "This love is an eminently human one since it is directed from one person to another through an affection of the will; it involves the good of the whole person, and therefore can enrich the expressions of body and mind with a unique dignity, ennobling these expressions as special ingredients and signs of the friendship distinctive of marriage." This clearly considers the anthropological dimension of people's existence and how the conjugal love promotes the good of this existence. However, when the document states the procreation as part of this conjugal love, the focus is not on the human reality, but rather on the legal aspect of a normative law that must be observed as a condition for authentic

Fronteiras, Recife, v. 2, n. 2, p. 69-89, jul./dez., 2019

decision on the subject. The publication of *Humanae Vitae* in 1968 became the final word so far. Unlike many people's expectations, Paul VI did not provide a new orientation, but rather maintained the prior teaching of *Casti Connubii* (1930), a pre-conciliar document.<sup>13</sup>

In the following five decades, the Magisterium abandons the *Gaudium et Spes*' legacy of moral conscience and the reading of history in sexual ethics issues. It returns to the argument based on natural law to ground the Catholic teaching on sexuality, matrimony, and procreation. *Humanae Vitae* presents an anthropological vision of conjugal love that transcends partial visions of human life. These visions would not consider the integrality of human life and relationships and their openness for the transcendent. Therefore, according to *Humanae Vitae*, procreation must be considered in a perspective that "transcends partial visions - whether they are biological, psychological, demographic, or sociological - in light of an integral vision of man and his vocation, not only natural and earthly, but also supernatural and eternal" (HV 7). It is a theology of conjugal love in order to support the inseparable finality of matrimony, namely, unity and procreation. This inseparability respects the nature and the finality of proper acts of matrimony (HV 11 and 12). This conception and teaching have been the basis of magisterial teaching on sexuality and matrimony. *Humanae Vitae*'s teaching on marriage and family was confirmed by *Amoris Laetitia* (68).

Moral teaching of the Catholic Church on procreation and birth control has distanced itself from the spirit of the moral renovation inspired by Vatican II. It dismissed personalism, characterized by an integral vision of the human person and his/her openness to moral consciousness. Instead, this teaching has insisted on the relevance of natural law as a means of discovering and expressing the moral dimension of human realities (VIDAL, 2012, p. 129). Therefore, the conjugal life and its proper acts are considered from a reductive

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conjugal love. This leads to the conclusion: "Sons of the Church may not undertake methods of birth control which are found blameworthy by the teaching authority of the Church in its unfolding of the divine law" (GS 51).

<sup>13</sup> Fifty years after the publication of *Humanae Vitae*, much controversy has been part of the Catholic theological ethics debate around issues of procreation. For a recent publication on this debate, see: CURRAN, 2018, p.520-542.

perspective of biological and juridical aspects. The licit and illicit become more important.

Procreation and other sexual issues are not matters isolated from the social concerns that impact individuals' and families' lives. When sexuality is considered, social issues should be raised in the same way they have been made in social ethics, such as poverty, lack of education, sexism, sexual abuses, sexually transmittable diseases, and specific social and cultural contexts. Moral teaching on sexuality, family, and procreation cannot be seen as unattached from social realities in which these human experiences are embodied.<sup>14</sup> Thus, theological reflections and moral orientations must be considered along-side social and historical realities, according to the Vatican II spirit of reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in light of the Gospel.

Two movements must be considered to address procreation and sexuality theologically. First, it is a movement of knowing the social and personal reality of people and couples inside their historical context and with their dramas, especially in those realities marked by poverty and exploitation. Second, it is the theological distinction between mutable and immutable. These two movements permit discernment about procreation that goes beyond immediate, biological aspects of proper acts of spouses and provides a space for discernment in a consciousness confronted by the immutable elements of Christian revelation and mutable historical contingencies. This is crucial for meaningful and creative ways to live Christian faith and to respond to the challenges of historical reality.

*Amoris Laetitia* returns to the foundations of *Gaudium et Spes* and presents a new way to approach Church teaching on matters of family. In so doing, it offers a methodology to examine sexual ethics and the practice of Catholic communities. Pope Francis does not change any aspect of the Catholic moral teaching, but he recognizes the dynamism of reality and the fragility of the human being. This requires pastoral care in a way that deals with people

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<sup>14</sup> Arguing that Pope Francis promotes a methodological and anthropological integration between social and sexual ethics in which social justice and particular contexts must be considered in matters of sexuality, Salzman and Lawler provide an example of the impact of poverty on decision realized to sexual ethics. See: SALZMAN; LAWLER, 2018, p.649-51.

who are not in perfect observance of the moral norms. He says: “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” (AL 03). Later in the text, he adds: “It is possible that in an objective situation of sin... 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... The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality” (AL 305).

This pastoral approach has three dimensions present in *Gaudium et Spes*: anthropological, historical, and theological. First, Francis sees the human being as a fragile being who is vulnerable to the impacts of cultural changes and make mistakes (AL 32). His view of the human is of a relational being, who needs to establish meaningful connections. But the current features of contemporaneity have created difficulties to these connections and force individuals to feel abandoned. In the no. 43, he states: “The Synod of Fathers noted that one symptom of the great poverty of contemporary culture is loneliness, arising from the absence of God in a person’s life and the fragility of relationships. There is also a general feeling of powerlessness in the face of socio-cultural realities that oftentimes end up crushing families... Families often feel abandoned due to a lack of interest and attention on the part of institutions” (AL 43). Francis does not consider an abstract human, but the real person who faces challenges daily. Reading *Amoris Laetitia* from an anthropological lens, Adriano Fabris says: “The Apostolic Exhortation focuses on the human being as such... It proposed a pastoral of the concrete. This is grounded on an anthropology that is not created as a collection of definitions, rather it is grounded on a strong idea of human beings, to whom he constantly refers, who must be affirmed in their daily life: with all problems that this application can have” (FABRIS, 2017, p.182). This human being needs to be cared for with the virtue of tenderness (AL 28) that meets the need of the accompaniment with “mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth” (AL 308). In Francis’ perspective, a fragile person who has failed does not need to suffer even more with marginalization or excommunication, but



rather needs a “respectful accompaniment” that encourages “to participate in the life of the community” (AL 243).

Second, it is clear in the Exhortation that history is dynamic and marked by complex realities. According to Fabris, this permits Pope Francis to have a “healthy and patient realism” (FABRIS, 2017, p.184) in which our feet are kept “firmly grounded in reality” (AL 06). The historical consciousness of Francis causes him to recognize the differences among countries, cultures, and contexts. Then he humbly affirms that he cannot provide final answers for any context. Rather, he encourages that a pastoral discernment takes place considering the local challenges. This does not diminish the Church’s teaching, but it opens the creativity of the Spirit and the sensitivity of pastors in applying this teaching. “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” (AL 03). It is in a historical reality that Francis presents the role of conscience and discernment when facing the complexity of situations. Therefore, “we have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL 37). Commenting on this aspect of *Amoris Laetitia*, Conor Kelly says: “This understanding of discernment and of the working of conscience does not abrogate the need for moral norms, nor does it devolve into relativism. Instead, this conception of the moral life as an ongoing relationship with God presumes the clear identification of an absolute and unchanging ideal... Conscience in this function is supposed to be in constant contact with the ideal, always seeking ways of getting closer to the ideal as the proper end” (KELLY, 2016, p.929).

This historical perspective, the role of discernment, and the working of conscience are a clear returning to *Gaudium et Spes* foundations and its emphasis on the sacredness of the conscience.<sup>15</sup> With this, Francis also connects the role of conscience with his anthropology of a fragile and relational being,

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<sup>15</sup> For Kelly, “*Amoris Laetitia* significantly advances the magisterial understanding of conscience, representing another step in an ongoing process of development and reclamations of the tradition that has been active in the Church since Vatican II” (KELLY, 2016, p. 927-928). *Fronteiras*, Recife, v. 2, n. 2, p. 69-89, jul./dez., 2019

who is in a journey of growth in his/her relationship with God based on mercy and grace.

Third, Pope Francis develops a theology of grace<sup>16</sup> responsible to sustain the human existential journey and relationship with God. Aware of certain tendencies of presenting an “artificial theological ideal of marriage,” Francis states: “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” (AL 36). The failure in trusting in God’s grace might lead to creating an ideal that is not achievable by humans. At the same time, this limits God’s power to the desire of a few people with lack of historical and anthropological awareness. For Francis, grace is part of God’s pedagogy of accompaniment with His children. Francis stresses God’s grace in His relationship with His children at the beginning and again at the end of this Exhortation. It seems that he suggests a theology of grace as the framework for Church pastoral care and the embodiment of the Gospel in history. Look at the text: “God’s indulgent love always accompanies our human journey; through grace, it heals and transforms hardened hearts, leading them back to the beginning through the way of the cross” (AL 62). Then, “In considering a pastoral approach towards people who have contracted a civil marriage, who are divorced and remained, 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

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<sup>16</sup> The theme of grace is a classical topic in Catholic theology. It has been discussed throughout the history of Christian theology, having its higher moment during the Scholastic period, when the theology of grace acquired the status of a theological discipline as *Doctrine of Grace*. In his study about grace in the Catholic tradition, Leonardo Boff suggests that there two ways of studying grace: the first focuses on the different approaches and perspectives that the theme of grace was examined by theologians. This is the study of the history of the theology of grace throughout the history of Christian experience. The second is the understanding of grace in its presence in our current history. Considering the second way, Boff presents grace as an encounter between God, in his mercy and generosity, and the human being, in his openness for God. This encounter creates dynamism that lifts the fallen, revives the dead, and liberates the oppressed. This encounter begins with God’s mercy and initiative to visit the human being in history. In Boff’s words: “Grace is relationship, is Exodus, is communion, is encounter, is dialogue, is openness, is going out, is history of two freedoms and the crossroad of two loves.” Leonardo BOFF, 1976, p.15). Pope Francis’s theology of grace fits in the second way suggested by Boff. Also based on a perspective of grace as an encounter, Francis develops his theology as an attempt to show and understand the presence of God’s grace in our history.

for them, something which is always possible by the power of the Holy Spirit” (AL 297).

*Amoris Laetitia* offers a different approach to issues of sexual ethics by going back to *Gaudium et Spes*' legacy of moral conscience, anthropology, and the reading of history.<sup>17</sup> Hence, it places this area of Catholic ethics close to the way Catholic social ethics has been developed since the Council. Hopefully, this development of approaching issues of sexual ethics will allow the Magisterium to make more connections to social issues and their impact on issues regarding sexuality, family, and procreation.

## Conclusion

Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et Spes*, opened windows to let a new fresh air into the Catholic Church, changing/informing her way of addressing historical challenges. This air has provided a new impulse for moral theology and its renovation in order to reflect and to orient Christian life to be faithful to the Gospel and to respond to the challenges of human reality. Social ethics and sexual ethics have followed different ways since the Council, especially in terms of magisterial teaching. Even among a tense debate, the former has been open to be challenged by historical reality in discerning the signs of the times in light of the Gospel. The latter has repeated what traditionally has been said without properly considering the signs of the times and the new reflections from different theological perspectives. This closeness has led magisterial teaching on sexuality to be far removed from the Spirit of Vatican II. In many aspects, this distance was overcome with the bridge built by Pope Francis' teaching. Now the challenge is to strengthen the return to this spirit towards a

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<sup>17</sup> Going in the same interpretative direction to understand AL and its return to GS, Salzman and Lawler say: “*Gaudium et Spes* opened the church to a different approach, a historically conscious, inductive approach that starts with the human person and the human situation and works upward to specific ethical rules and general ethical principles. It emphasized that, “[t]hanks to the experience of past ages, the progress of the sciences, and the treasures hidden in the various forms of human culture, the nature of man himself is revealed and new roads to truth are opened.” This trilogy, human experience, culture, and science is paradigmatic for an inductive approach and is widely reflected in AL” (SALZMAN AND MICHAEL, 2018, p.634).

courageous dialogue with history, theologians, secular society, sciences, and the faithful, especially those who are excluded from this debate. Seeing things *from below*, beginning from the lives of the least in our societies and churches can be the way to realize this dialogue and to develop Vatican II's spirit of renovation in social and sexual ethics. This will show that the Church has only one face: the loving and merciful face of Christ incarnated in history.

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