

# New Challenges to *Humanae vitae*: Conscience and Discernment\*

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ABSTRACT: This essay reviews the project of revisionists and argues that some moral theologians are interpreting *Amoris Laetitia* as promoting a view of conscience and discernment that undermines if not abandons the constant teaching of the Church that there are universal, absolute, immutable moral norms. This essay also shows that this interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia* conflicts with the teaching on the nature of conscience and its relationship to the moral law as set out in key magisterial documents.

**M**ANY OF THE CHALLENGES against *Humanae vitae* fifty years ago were rooted in reforms that revisionists had been advocating for years against the approach to moral theology present in the “manuals.” Revisionists (as did many traditionalists such as Pinckaers<sup>1</sup>), found the manuals to be fundamentally legalistic, not personalist enough and not Christocentric. In *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Conscience*, James Keenan claims *Humanae vitae* “stymied” the progress over the manualists that was being made by the

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<sup>1</sup> Servais Pinckaers, OP, *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Sr. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: The Catholic Univ. of America Press, 1995).

revisionists and neo-manualists before *Humanae vitae* was promulgated.<sup>2</sup>

#### Moral Theologians as Authoritative Teachers in the Manuals

What revisionists approved in the manualist tradition was that the manualists considered theologians to be the authoritative teachers of morality and that among those teachers a fair degree of diversity was tolerated. Manuals often reported how many theologians and which ones held this position or that and because of the stature of the theologians or their number – and also the strength of the arguments – would pronounce one position “safer” to hold than others. The categories of *probabilism*, *probabiliorism*, and *equiprobabilism* were developed to help people determine what views could help guide their decision-making. But over time, the popes and curial offices began to assume the role of authoritative teachers and eventually the phrase “the Church teaches” no longer referred to the teaching of reliable theologians but to teachings expounded in magisterial documents or curial decisions.

Keenan laments this development and notes that the categories of probabilism and the like fell out of use because now too many theologians were considered not to be reliable – meaning that those who rejected Church teaching no longer had trusted status. He also laments that the role of theologians seemed to be reduced largely to defending or explaining magisterial teaching rather than being the sources of teaching. Since their role as authorities had been usurped by the magisterium, he notes that some have come to think that moral theologians should perform the role of prophets or discern the direction in which Church teaching will/should develop.<sup>3</sup> But, as we shall see momentarily, Keenan’s claim that “[W]e must help persons develop morally mature personalities through becoming self-governing moral subjects. Whereas earlier moralists decided what was right or wrong in every area of life, contemporary moralists are interested *in helping subjects rightly realize their moral truth*”<sup>4</sup> (my emphasis), and this fits even better the self-understanding of contemporary revisionist theologians.

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<sup>2</sup> James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Conscience* (New York NY: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Keenan, p. 132.

<sup>4</sup> James F. Keenan, SJ and Thomas R. Kopfensteiner, “Moral Theology out of Western Europe,” in *Theological Studies* 59/1 (1998): 107-35.

### Proportionalism

Revisionists put forward proportionalism as the correct moral method to replace the legalism of the manuals. James Keenan states: “Proportionalism was basically a transitional phase in Catholic theological ethics. In trying to establish a method for moral judgment as an alternative to the moral manuals, proportionalism was simply the logic of the moral manuals without the overriding absolute moral norms.”<sup>5</sup> Proportionalism became the key tool for those who mounted an attack on the Church’s teaching on contraception. This attack developed just prior to and during the discussion of contraception that took place during the drafting of *Gaudium et spes* and as part of the work of the Special Commission on Family, Marriage and Birth Rate, which advised Paul VI that the Church could and should change its teaching on contraception: clearly something was in the air.<sup>6</sup> Proportionalists seemed to want in some sense to honor the judgment that there were negative values in contraception – as indicated by their coining of such terms as *pre-moral evil*, *ontic evil*, and *disvalue* – while at the same time holding that there were circumstances where contraception was morally permissible. Those who rejected the Church’s teaching on contraception also claimed that the natural law arguments used to defend it were biologicistic and physicalistic and did not take into account the higher human or spiritual values of the marital act.<sup>7</sup>

Those opposing proportionalism claimed that proportionalism effectively was a rejection of universal objective absolute moral norms and was at base relativistic. If individuals could morally choose to do something that the Church teaches to be an “intrinsic evil” because more good than evil would result, this would mean that there are no actions that qualify as intrinsic evil, actions that can never be done, no matter the intention, the circumstances, or the consequences. Proportionalists denied that they were relativists, that they

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<sup>5</sup> Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, p. 158.

<sup>6</sup> For a recounting of the history of *Gaudium et spes* in respect to contraception and the work of the Pontifical Commission, see Roberto de Mattei, “The Encyclical *Humanae vitae* in the Context of its Time, *L’ubica* (Nov. 18, 2018), at <https://gloria.tv/article/nwBDLPVPh1Dj67cMAAo21aAhV>; see also Robert McClory, *Turning Point* (New York: Crossroad, 1995); and Francis W. Swift, “An Analysis of the American Theological Reaction to Janssens’ Stand on the Pill,” *Louvain Studies* 1 (1966-1967): 19-54.

<sup>7</sup> Charles E. Curran continues to make this accusation even against the personalist John Paul II, see Curran’s *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2005), pp. 115-17.

rejected the existence of absolute objective evils. Largely what they claimed was that these norms could not be known on the basis of some *a priori* norm derived from human nature, or the human essence. Father Bernard Häring, for instance, allowed that there are abiding truths, such as the wrongness of slavery (but that is a truth, in his view, that came to be known through an historical process).<sup>8</sup> Moreover, in defense of their support of objective morality, proportionalists claimed that there is an objectively moral action that each individual should do in each particular instance but that it could not be determined ahead of time by appeal to some universal norm without reference to intention, circumstances, and consequences. That position effectively guts the traditional understanding of objective norms as norms that apply at all times and all places.

Modern revisionists certainly continue to challenge claims that there are absolute moral norms based on an *a priori* human essence and the correlative claim that some actions are intrinsically evil, all the while protesting that they are not relativists.<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the question of intrinsic evils truly does not greatly interest them. The fact is that, even if there were intrinsic evils, revisionists would still allow a freedom of conscience that does not give high priority to the role of universal objective absolute moral norms in individual decision-making. What they are primarily interested in, as noted earlier, is in helping individuals become fully self-realizing by helping them make moral decisions according to the moral values they claim as their own, in short, in what they now call “discernment.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, Vol.: General Moral Theology (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), p. 323.

<sup>9</sup> Edward Pentin, “Pontifical Academy for Life Member: Term ‘Intrinsically Evil’ Too Restricting,” *National Catholic Register* (blog), Jan. 29, 2018, at <http://www.ncregister.com/blog/edward-pentin/pontifical-academy-for-life-member-term-intrinsically-evil-too-restricting>.

<sup>10</sup> For a pre-*Amoris laetitia* recounting of a similar position, see Keenan and Kopfensteiner, “Moral Theology out of Western Europe,” p. 108. Pope Francis has given several seminal speeches on the importance of discernment: see, for instance, Cindy Wooden, “Pope Francis asks Jesuits to teach diocesan priests the art of discernment,” *America Magazine* (August 25, 2016), at <https://www.americamagazine.org/issue/pope-calls-jesuits-teach-discernment>. See also “Pope’s Full Address to Newly Appointed Bishops,” *Zenit* (September 14, 2018), at <https://zenit.org/articles/popes-address-to-newly-appointed-bishops>.

Other Challenges to *Humanae vitae*

Some current challenges to *Humanae vitae* are not much different from what they were twenty-five or fifty years ago. For instance, alive and well is the claim that the teaching of *Humanae vitae* has not been “received” by the faithful, that the *sensus fidelium* has rejected the teaching of *Humanae vitae*.<sup>11</sup> Since the vast majority of sexually active Catholics have used contraception and since all the polls show the vast majority do not think that it is wrong to use contraception, this shows that the faithful do not find the use of contraception to be incompatible with Christian discipleship.<sup>12</sup>

Certainly, revisionists insisted then and insist now, that the teaching of *Humanae vitae* was not infallible. Rather, it was not infallible or authoritative and thus not binding on the consciences of individuals.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, revisionists claim that the teachings of the Church based on natural law were subject to the same limitations revisionists understand to be true of natural law itself – that is, norms said to be true by natural law are shaped by cultures and cannot necessarily be said to have universal validity.<sup>14</sup> The Church must allow its teaching to be shaped by historical development in cultures. Nor is Scripture a reliable source of universal moral truths since it is an historical document that needs to be interpreted. If the Church is not infallible and if it is not even reliable, then it is important to respect the freedom and creativity of the

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<sup>11</sup> Massimo Faggioli, “*Humanae vitae*, A Half-Century On: How Different Catholics Read It” *Commonweal* (January 9, 2018) at <https://www.commonweal.org/humanae-vitae-half-century>. See also Albert Gelpi and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, “Epilogue: *Sensus Fidelium*” in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting A Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley, SJ (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2014), pp. 170-80.

<sup>12</sup> For an explanation of the proper role of the *sensus fidelium*, see International Theological Commission “*Sensus Fidei* in the Life of the Church” (2014) at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti\\_documents/rc\\_cti\\_2014\\_0610\\_sensus-fidei\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_2014_0610_sensus-fidei_en.html). See also Janet E. Smith, “The *Sensus Fidelium* and *Humanae vitae*,” *Angelicum* 83 (2006): 271-97, also published in *Called to Holiness and Communion: Vatican II on the Church*, ed. Rev. Stephen Boguslawski, OP and Robert Fastiggi (Scranton PA: Univ. of Scranton Press, 2009), pp. 291-318.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, Revs. John C. Ford, S.J. and Gerald Kelly, S.J. provide strong reasons to consider the teaching infallible at the time *Casti Connubii: Contemporary Moral Theology*, Vol.2: *Marriage Questions* (Westminster MD: The Newman Press: 1964), pp. 263-78. Arguments for the infallibility of *Humanae vitae* can be found in Germain Grisez, John C. Ford, Joseph Boyle, Jr, John Finnis, and William E. May, *The Teaching of Humanae vitae: A Defense* (San Francisco CA: Ignatius Press, 1988).

<sup>14</sup> Häring, *Faithful and Free*, pp. 319-33.

conscience.

But in recent reports of conferences being held in Rome<sup>15</sup> and in the text *Amoris Laetitia Un punto di svolta per la teologia morale?*<sup>16</sup> most of the “challenges” to the Church’s teaching on contraception noted above receive little mention and certainly do not take central place. Indeed, proportionalism, at one time the major weapon against the Church’s teaching on contraception, seems to be largely defunct as a moral theory,<sup>17</sup> perhaps because the focus is no longer on the objective morality of acts but on the subjective state of the agent. Whether or not contraception is objectively moral or not is virtually not addressed. Rather, questions of conscience reign supreme.

#### *Amoris laetitia* as a Development in Moral Theology

The new challenges to *Humanae vitae* are associated with interpretations of *Amoris laetitia*<sup>18</sup> that claim that it accomplishes a development in moral theology. Here I am not going to attempt to establish whether *Amoris laetitia* either accomplishes or sets out to accomplish a development in moral theology or whether it correctly utilizes texts cited.<sup>19</sup> Those, of course, are crucial questions, yet ones not likely to be definitively answered for some time. In the meantime, those who find a development of moral theology in *Amoris laetitia* will not hesitate to use their interpretation to address moral issues. While it is necessary to challenge the “development” interpretation as a legitimate interpretation of *Amoris laetitia*, here I am only going to attempt to demonstrate that the purported development is not compatible with established Church teaching primarily in respect to its understanding of what the conscience is.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, see Edward Pentin, “Pontifical Gregorian University Hosts Series of Talks to Take New Look at *Humanae vitae*,” *National Catholic Register* (blogs), Oct 21, 2017; and Edward Pentin, “Cardinal Parolin: *Amoris laetitia* Represents New Paradigm, Spirit and Approach,” *National Catholic Register* (blogs) Jan 11, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Stephan Goertz and Carline Witting, *Amoris laetitia: Un punto di svolta per la teologia morale?* (Milan: San Paolo, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> See Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown Univ. Press, 2008), p. 109.

<sup>18</sup> Pope Francis, *Amoris laetitia*, Apostolic Exhortation (March 19, 2016) at [https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20160319\\_amoris-laetitia\\_en.pdf](https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> For a strong argument that *Amoris laetitia* does not properly use Thomistic texts see, Rev. Kevin Flannery, S.J. and Rev. Thomas Berg, “*Amoris laetitia*, ‘Pastoral Discernment’ and Thomas Aquinas,” *Nova et Vetera* 15/2 (Summer 2017): 81-111.

This development involves, among other things, the role of the individual conscience in decision-making. Certainly, from the time *Humanae vitae* was promulgated, not only theologians but also bishops' conferences claimed that individuals who found a conflict of duties between honoring the procreative good of the sexual act and the unitive good were to follow their consciences in this regard rather than submit to the teachings of *Humanae vitae*. Some of the bishops' conferences that made this claim in their initial response to *Humanae vitae* eventually clarified that claim in a way that amounted to a retraction.<sup>20</sup> What concept of conscience guided that claim was, I believe, not very clear at the time. It has become clearer since.

It must be noted, however, that the development purportedly advanced by *Amoris laetitia* is said not to be doctrinal but pastoral in nature. The pastoral method that some claim *Amoris laetitia* promotes is one that honors the decision of the individual conscience over conformity to Church teaching. A decision made in accord with the values the individual has discerned to have priority in his/her decision-making should have greater force in making the choice than the "rules" of the Church.<sup>21</sup> *Amoris laetitia* laments:

We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them.<sup>22</sup>

Few would argue that anything should "replace" consciences, but there is significant disagreement about what it means to "form" consciences, particularly in respect to the role of "norms" or "moral laws" in that formation.

Those who find a development in moral theology in *Amoris laetitia* (for convenience, I will refer to them as the "discerners") look to passages that portray insistence on rules as an act that threatens to "replace" consciences,

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the statements of the Canadian Bishops (as well as others) in *The Birth Control Debate*, ed. Robert G. Hoyt (Kansas City: National Catholic Reporter: 1968), 169-170; and their clarification "Statement on the Formation of Conscience" (Dec. 1, 1973) at <http://www.consciencelaws.org/religion/religion040.aspx>.

<sup>21</sup> It is imprecise that the English translation of *Amoris laetitia* speaks of "rules" – which are generally what govern games and not equivalent to a "law," whereas the Latin text uses the term "*norma*" which certainly can mean "law." Still, I am going to use "rules" since it seems to correspond better with the understanding of discerners.

<sup>22</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 37.

rather than form them.<sup>23</sup> In *Amoris laetitia* we read:

It is reductive simply to consider whether or not an individual's actions correspond to a general law or rule, because that is not enough to discern and ensure full fidelity to God in the concrete life of a human being.<sup>24</sup>

Section 305 speaks of the “simple” application of moral laws to objectively sinful situations as “throwing stones,” as being a kind of violence:

For this reason, a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply moral laws to those living in “irregular” situations, as if they were stones to throw at people's lives. This would bespeak the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church's teachings, “sitting on the chair of Moses and judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families.” ... By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God. Let us remember that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties.”<sup>25</sup>

Several themes of the discerners can be found in the above passage, notably that: insisting on moral laws is exercising unfair judgment over the wounded; insisting on moral laws does not acknowledge the complexities of life – it is to see things as black and white; and that insisting on moral laws is to close off important avenues of growth.

These themes grow out of the discerners' understanding of conscience which they find present in section 303:

[R]ecognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add 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. Naturally, every effort should be made to encourage the development of an enlightened conscience, formed and guided by the responsible and serious discernment of one's pastor, and to

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<sup>23</sup> The fullest statement of what I am calling the “discerners” interpretation of *Amoris Laetitia*, is expressed by Cardinal Blaise Cupich, “Pope Francis' Revolution of Mercy: *Amoris laetitia* as a New Paradigm of Catholicity,” *Vatican Insider Documents* (Feb. 9, 2018) at <http://www.lastampa.it/2018/02/09/vaticaninsider/pope-francis-revolution-of-mercy-amoris-laetitia-as-a-new-paradigm-of-catholicity-skMox0lKtoX5szfKH6QgrL/pagina.html>.

<sup>24</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 304.

<sup>25</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 305.



encourage an ever greater trust in God's grace. Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not correspond objectively to the overall demands of the Gospel. It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while yet not fully the objective ideal. In any event, let us recall that this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal<sup>26</sup> to be more fully realized.<sup>27</sup>

The discerners find in the above passage their view that conscience is not a repository of the natural law or even a trustworthy guide for how to live out the demands of the Gospel. Rather, the conscience enables a "dynamic" discernment that helps a moral agent to determine what is the best he/she can do at this moment. Moral decisions are not to be judged for the correspondence to natural law or the Gospel but as indicators of personal growth towards the "ideal."

What I hope to establish here is that there is a radical difference between the understanding of conscience employed by the Church in its magisterial documents (to be described below)<sup>28</sup> based largely on the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas (which I will call the "traditional" position) and the "discerners"<sup>22</sup> interpretation of *Amoris laetitia*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> The translation of the Latin "exemplar" by "ideal" is not unproblematic: the term "ideal" can suggest something rarely attained or even unattainable; "exemplar" does not have that connotation. See, Robert Fastiggi and Dawn Eden Goldstein, "Does *Amoris laetitia* 303 Really Undermine Catholic Moral Teaching?," *Vatican Insider Documents*, at <http://www.lastampa.it/2017/09/26/vaticaninsider/eng/documents/does-amoris-laetitia-really-undermine-catholic-moral-teaching-yom5rmElfGPzsMDIS7o6eP/pagina.html>. For a response by Christian Brugger, see Pete Baklinski, "Yes, *Amoris laetitia* 303 really undermines Catholic moral teaching: scholar," *Life Site News* (Sept. 28, 2017 at <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/yes-amoris-laetitia-303-really-undermines-catholic-moral-teaching-scholar>).

<sup>27</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 303.

<sup>28</sup> A succinct and basic presentation of the Church's view on conscience can be found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, in sections 1776-1794 and on natural law in sections 1950-1960

<sup>29</sup> A worthy comparison of the difference between the traditional view and revisionist view of conscience can be found in Robert J. Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience in Contemporary Roman Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Univ. Press of America, 1998). Smith compares the understandings of conscience of Germain Grisez and Bernard Häring. The selection of Grisez as representative of the traditionalist view is perhaps unfortunate because he was not a traditional Thomist nor did he incorporate a personalist perspective into his work. Nonetheless, Smith's is a valuable study. See also David E. DeCosse, "The

### Traditional View of Conscience

Strangely, both traditionalists and revisionists find support for their positions in the description of conscience given in *Gaudium et spes*.<sup>30</sup>

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 man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths.<sup>31</sup>

Traditionalists point to the claims of this passage that there is within the conscience a law that man “does not impose on himself, but which holds him to obedience” and that “man has in his heart a law written by God” and that “to obey it is the very dignity of man” to confirm the view of *synderesis* as the repository of natural law moral truths that should guide moral decisions.<sup>32</sup> In the traditional view, man’s actual acts of conscience are to evaluate the morality of the possible choices before him in light of the universal principles (and their derivatives) that *synderesis* discloses to him. When there is a conflict between the agent’s own will and what he understands to be the will of God, man’s dignity lies not in abiding by his own judgment but in submitting to God’s will. It is foundational to Christianity that God’s will is always superior

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Primacy of Conscience, Vatican II, and Pope Francis: The Opportunity to Renew a Tradition”, in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting A Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley, S.J. (Maryknoll NY: Orbis Books, 2014), pp. 156-69.

<sup>30</sup> Indeed, both Karol Wojtyła and Bernard Häring were involved in the drafting of *Gaudium et spes*, and that might account for the diversity of interpretations. A description of the two views of *Gaudium et spes* is found in Richard Spinello, “Pope John Paul II on conscience,” *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (August 1, 2009) at <http://www.hprweb.com/2009/08/pope-john-paul-ii-on-conscience>; see also Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press: 2001).

<sup>31</sup> Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral Constitution (December 7, 1965), 16. online at [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

<sup>32</sup> Häring cites this passage at the beginning of his treatment of conscience in *Free and Faithful in Christ*, p. 224. He does not immediately comment on it, but it seems to be the portion of this passage that has man “speaking with God” that suggests a “creative” element of acts of conscience and also the larger portion of his passage that speaks about the necessity of man obeying an erroneous conscience that is most appealing to him.

in goodness to man's. But submission to God's will does not mean that one is violating one's deepest self; rather one is conforming to the deepest truths of one's being. God's laws are laws that help persons perfect themselves. In fact, the ability to know those laws and to be able to act freely in accord with them, is considered to be the defining and the most noble features of the human person.

God has gifted mankind with the ability to discern the order he has established in the world and to know that living in accord with that order is beneficial for him. Indeed, man's essence is a part of that order and for man to live in accord with his essence is the very challenge of the human life, an essence partially known through reason and more fully known through revelation. Indeed, moral truths are true because they are based on human nature, or the essence of the human person. Since all persons everywhere and at all times share the same human nature, the fundamental truths of morality are universally true.

The Church, moreover, in the view of traditionalists, is, as John Henry Newman stated, "The answer to an urgent demand."<sup>33</sup> Since we and our cultures are so flawed, we can easily become confused about natural law truths. Thus, Christ gave the power of rightly interpreting natural law to the Church. Obeying the Church is not an act of surrendering one's dignity to an external authority but is responding generously to Christ himself. John Paul II often repeated the passage from *Gaudium et spes* that "Christ fully reveals man to himself."<sup>34</sup> Christ was fully one with the Father because he always did the Father's will, and we can become one with Christ and the Father if we conform our actions to the Father's will.

#### Revisionist View of Conscience

The contemporary revisionist view of conscience is certainly not new, although I am not certain that traditionalists have altogether accurately understood this point.<sup>35</sup> Now that it is linked with the practice of "discernment," some elements of the revisionist view of conscience, not always or fully

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<sup>33</sup> John Henry Newman, "A Letter Addressed to His Grace the Duke of Norfolk," at <https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/newman-norfolk.asp>.

<sup>34</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Claims that the revisionist view of conscience has been misunderstood by traditionalists can be found in *Veritatis Splendor: An American Response*, etc. by Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O'Keefe (New York NY: Sheed and Ward, 2001).

recognized in the past, are coming into high relief. Here, I will largely be following the views of Bernard Häring, the Redemptorist, whose thinking on moral theology has been foundational for revisionists and remains so. Indeed, Keenan identifies Häring's work as the culminating achievement of the revisionist movement.<sup>36</sup> Keenan also notes that "Universally, conscience becomes the point of departure for revisionists."<sup>37</sup>

I am going to make four major points about the discerners' view of conscience that are shaped, I believe, by the thought of Häring:

(1) Häring's view of conscience was formed much more by insights in developmental psychology, among others, that of Erik Erickson, than it was rooted in the Thomistic philosophical view of conscience.<sup>38</sup>

(2) The view of conscience that Häring was rejecting was a caricature of the Thomistic understanding of conscience.

(3) The view developed by Häring was soundly rejected in *Veritatis splendor*, which advanced a personalistic view of conscience that overcomes the legalistic view of conscience Häring found in the manuals. (Here John Paul II's views on "participated theonomy" and "consciousness" are of key importance.)

(4) The discerners' understanding of conscience yields an understanding of discernment and formation at odds with that advanced in magisterial documents.

Reading Häring's *Free and Faithful in Christ* is a dizzying and almost breath-taking experience. He sweeps the reader up in a torrent of enthusiasm for what is "free" and "creative" and "prophetic" with nods to fidelity and responsibility as well. He has an almost infectious confidence in the ability of Christians to put aside sin and boldly and prophetically create a new world. He works very hard to free Christians from legalism and from obedience to any authority whose commands are accepted simply because they are laid down by authority.<sup>39</sup> Christ was freely faithful to His Father and so should we be. Christ

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<sup>36</sup> Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, 59, 95. Häring served on the Special Commission that advised Paul VI on contraception. He was one of the earliest dissenters from *Humanae vitae*, see "The Encyclical Crisis," *Commonweal* (September 6, 1968) at <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/encyclical-crisis>.

<sup>37</sup> Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, p. 97.

<sup>38</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, pp. 87, 168-77.

<sup>39</sup> One reason for this is said to be his disappointment in the ready obedience of

came to set us free and to enable us to do creative work.

Häring had a view of the conscience that seems to equate conscience with the very self of the person: “Conscience has to do with man’s total selfhood as a moral agent. The intellectual, volitional and emotional dynamics are not separated; they mutually compenetrates in the very depth where the person is person to himself.”<sup>40</sup> That self (also called the “heart”) is constituted most basically by the moral values to which one has committed one’s self through one’s life choices.<sup>41</sup>

Häring describes Erik Erikson’s view of moral maturation as being one where an individual works to become autonomous from his superego and to establish interiorly a set of commitments to moral values that give him a fundamental orientation to life. The story of each individual’s conscience is the story of how his choices shape him, choices made in “mutual reciprocity” with others. He is always to be seeking his own good and the good of others and to be willing to learn from his community. To grow morally, he must be true to his past and attempt to move forward, which would mean acting out of his deep fundamental orientation. What is more important than adherence to objective moral norms is that the individual preserve his authenticity. The self can be challenged, to be sure, but there should be no violence to the self in the form of reluctant adherence to norms not sincerely embraced by the moral agent since it would be a diminution of freedom and would inhibit future growth. It is wrong to try to persuade someone to perform or not perform an action out of obedience to some authority since that would be an imposition of external morality and thus would disqualify the act as being truly moral since, in this view, for an act to be truly moral it must stem from choices made in accord with the person’s own values. Some choices not in accord with objective moral norms might have something of what Häring speaks of as a “prophetic” element because they can reveal hitherto fore unknown ethical possibilities.

In short, in Häring’s view of following one’s conscience means being true to the values that have guided one’s life whereas submitting to external norms would be to abdicate the freedom and responsibility that defines the Christian life. Perhaps this description explains why revisionists deny that they are rejecting absolute objective norms. It is not that such norms do not exist; it is that it is more important that one act in accord with one’s own values.

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his fellow Catholics to the Nazi regime.

<sup>40</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful*, p. 235.

<sup>41</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful*, pp. 90, 93, 259.

Clearly, *synderesis* as a repository of natural law precepts is not a part of Häring's view of conscience. He rejected understandings of *synderesis* as the ready understanding of natural law, or universal absolute moral norms, from which other binding norms might be derived and which serve to guide a person in making judgments of conscience in respect to particular acts. Conscience for him was the repository of the values to which one has committed one's self.

It is, thus not surprising that revisionists read *Gaudium et spes* and understand natural law very differently from traditionalists. They find it has a very personalist cast in speaking of the "voice of God within." The "law of God" that one finds within is not a set of universal moral values or norms but rather the natural striving for truth that each person finds within. Indeed, revisionists hold that *Gaudium et spes* advances a new paradigm of the conscience:

[T]he actions and choices of the individual are a reflection of the kind of person one is and one will become. Actions are not considered in isolation from the person performing them. Furthermore, the person at the center of morality is "part of the material world, interrelational with other persons, a social and historical being." As a result the relationships and circumstances which go to make up the subject's experience do have real and enduring moral significance. *Gaudium et spes* puts forward a model of morality in which the person is the source of ethical discernment and action. In so doing it initiates a move toward a new paradigm, one that emphasizes personal responsibility rather than obedience.<sup>42</sup>

Again, the outcome of the discerner's view of conscience is that the job of the conscience is not to try to access the moral norms one knows by virtue of natural law, but it is to identify the values one has adopted through fruitful relationships with others.

Häring thinks that natural law is something shaped by the community and that it changes over time as communities change. He uses the by now well-known categories of a classicist static morality and a historically conscious, dynamic morality.<sup>43</sup> The contrast he draws between two approaches to natural law is stark:

One mentality is closed minded, unresponsive, anthropocentric in the bad sense. This can be described as a rationalistic approach where there is no place left for new

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<sup>42</sup> Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth*, 108, citing at n19, Kevin Kelly, *New Directions in Moral Theology* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1987), p. 30.

<sup>43</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful*, p. 319.

insights, no appreciation of the values and experiences of other cultures and subcultures.<sup>44</sup>

And later he describes the approach he advocates:

The other approach is “marked by the capacity to listen and to learn in dialogue with others with a vivid sense of the continuity of life. This attitude fits easily in the great dimensions of the history of salvation and revelation.... In this vision, natural law cannot be conceived as a closed system.

In other passages, Häring identified natural law with the person’s own striving to know the truth, not with the truths that can be naturally known by every person (the traditional view) or by the community over time (his earlier view):

It is unthinkable to tell people in the Church or outside the Church to ignore their own conscience in favor of certain formulations of the “natural law,” since natural law is not the legislation of any human authority but the sincerity of man searching the truth, the inner impulse to follow one’s own sincere conviction.<sup>45</sup>

This view seems very compatible with the discerners’ view of conscience, which considers sincerity, or being true to one’s own values, as being the most important feature of a moral choice.

While there are many points of disagreement between the discerners’ view of conscience and the traditional view that deserve attention, here I am going to focus on their claim that to try to lead someone to follow norms from an exterior source is to do violence to the self, is to try to reestablish a childish dependence upon the superego, rather than to honor the person as a free and responsible adult. That claim is based on an erroneous view of the traditional view of conscience and seriously conflicts with the understanding of conscience developed by John Paul II in his philosophical works and in the seminal encyclical *Veritatis splendor*.<sup>46</sup> Contemporary revisionists seem to have little awareness how John Paul II’s views of conscience – and consciousness – are very much personalist, although, of course, they differ in radical

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<sup>44</sup> Häring, *Free and Faithful*, p. 325.

<sup>45</sup> Robert Smith, *Conscience*, 94 (n103) citing, Bernard Häring, *Morality is for Persons*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1971), p. 171.

<sup>46</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor*, Encyclical Letter (August 6, 1993), [http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_enc\\_06081993\\_veritatis-splendor.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html).

ways from the views of the discerners.

#### Conscience in *Veritatis splendor*

*Veritatis splendor* was written explicitly to demonstrate that many of the principles of revisionist theologians were not compatible with the moral theology taught and utilized by the Church, most particularly, that proportionalism was not a legitimate development of Church teaching.<sup>47</sup> The terminology favored by revisionists is found throughout the document, such as “discernment,” “creative,” “freedom of conscience,” and “fundamental option”; clearly an attempt was made to confront head on the claims of revisionists.

*Veritatis splendor* rejects a view of conscience that gives sovereignty to the autonomy of the reason of the individual person over the sovereignty of God.<sup>48</sup> That might not be quite what the revisionist view of conscience does, for their view of conscience does not focus exclusively upon reason and reason’s attempt to discover objective truth. The autonomy revisionists promote is the autonomy of the “self,” which is a mix of many factors, not just reason — discerners like to speak of the conscience as a person’s individual “story.” Nor do they necessarily reject the sovereignty of God: what they reject is not God’s sovereignty but the value of insisting on His sovereignty and even more so they reject viewing the Magisterium as a reliable, let alone, infallible interpreter of God’s law. Both are rejected as being disrespectful to the individual conscience and as being a wrong-headed way to accompany people in their discernment of moral choices.

What contemporary revisionists fail to see is how important personal appropriation of moral norms is to the Church’s understanding of conscience, especially as described by John Paul II. Because of his work in phenomenology, which puts great emphasis on the person and consciousness, John Paul II developed a personalistic Thomism that emphasized the importance of the interiority of the human person and especially his consciousness of himself as a moral agent, as an entity capable of knowing the truth and living in accord with it. In *Veritatis splendor* he hits head on some of the key concerns of contemporary revisionists:

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<sup>47</sup> For a traditionalist interpretation of *Veritatis splendor*, see *Veritatis Splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology: Studies by Ten Outstanding Scholars*, ed. J.A. Dinoia, O.P. and Romanus Cesario, O.P. (Chicago IL: Midwest Theological Forum, 1999).

<sup>48</sup> See *Veritatis splendor*, 65.



Man's *genuine moral autonomy* in no way means the rejection but rather the acceptance of the moral law, of God's command: "The Lord God gave this command to the man..." (Gen 2:16). *Human freedom and God's law meet and are called to intersect*, in the sense of man's free obedience to God and of God's completely gratuitous benevolence towards man. Hence obedience to God is not, as some would believe, a *heteronomy*, as if the moral life were subject to the will of something all-powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom. If in fact a heteronomy of morality were to mean a denial of man's self-determination or the imposition of norms unrelated to his good, this would be in contradiction to the Revelation of the Covenant and of the redemptive Incarnation. Such a heteronomy would be nothing but a form of alienation, contrary to divine wisdom and to the dignity of the human person.<sup>49</sup>

Does not John Paul II manifest a keen appreciation of the concerns of contemporary revisionists here? He holds that it would in fact be a violation of man's nature and of the necessity that man be self-determining if the Christian life were to demand of the human person that he submit himself to "the will of something all-powerful, absolute, extraneous to man and intolerant of his freedom."<sup>50</sup> John Paul II does not counsel a robotic obedience to externally imposed laws. Rather, he speaks of a "participated theonomy"<sup>51</sup> wherein "man's free obedience to God's law effectively implies that human reason and human will participate in God's wisdom and providence."<sup>52</sup>

John Paul II's concept of participation is a very rich one. It is based on the ability of man to know the truth and freely choose it. This is an ability at the very core of man's nature. The human person and God are not at odds on that level. God's will is that man should never commit adultery. Man's will should be that he never commit adultery and he should accept that, again, as a "law" friendly to his being. He is capable of seeing things as God sees things and valuing them as God does because he is made in the image and likeness of God.

John Paul II also had a very refined understanding of the terms "conscious" and "consciousness," developed in his days as a philosopher (these words and the concepts conveyed by them play a major role in his works), and even began preferring the term "self-conscious" to "rational" when speaking of man's essential nature (as he spoke "self-determining" in place of "free," of

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<sup>49</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 41. emphasis in the original.

<sup>50</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 41.

<sup>51</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 41.

“self-mastery” in place of “virtue,” of “self-giving” in place of “social”).<sup>53</sup> The words “conscious” and “consciousness” refer to the interiority of man, to his subjective appropriation of objective truths.

In *Love and Responsibility*, John Paul II coined the word “conscious parenthood” (akin to “responsible parenthood” but different in extremely important ways).<sup>54</sup> The term meant that the human being striving to live in accord with his dignity, with his nature as a truth-seeking, free and responsible entity, would be conscious that sex leads to being a parent and that, thus, one should only have sex with someone with whom one is willing to be a parent — which, of course, means, with a spouse. That realization would not be one that makes a person morose or rebellious but one he would recognize as fully compatible with his own dignity and the dignity of others and thus he would embrace it as such a truth.

This view of man’s relationship to God’s moral truths is succinctly expressed in *Veritatis splendor*, quoting *Gaudium et spes*:

Patterned on God’s freedom, man’s freedom is not negated by his obedience to the divine law; indeed, only through this obedience does it abide in the truth and conform to human dignity. This is clearly stated by the Council: “Human dignity requires man to act through conscious and free choice, as motivated and prompted personally from within, and not through blind internal impulse or merely external pressure. Man achieves such dignity when he frees himself from all subservience to his feelings, and in a free choice of the good, pursues his own end by effectively and assiduously marshaling the appropriate means.”<sup>55</sup>

And further it states:

These universal and permanent laws correspond to things known by the practical reason and are applied to particular acts through the judgment of conscience. The acting subject personally assimilates the truth contained in the law. He appropriates this truth of his being and makes it his own by his acts and the corresponding virtues.<sup>56</sup>

In the tradition, the act of discernment for a person making a difficult choice

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<sup>53</sup> Janet E. Smith, “Natural Law and the Irreducibility of Personalism,” *Nova et Vetera* 11/4 (2013): 1229-48.

<sup>54</sup> Janet E. Smith, “Conscious Parenthood,” *Nova et Vetera* 6/4 (2008): 927-50.

<sup>55</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 42, quoting *Gaudium et Spes*, 17.

<sup>56</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 52.

is not at all robotic but it involves the sincere attempt to discover what is God's will in respect to one's choice. There are several discussions in *Veritatis splendor* that demonstrate that such a view of conscience and discernment is not an abrogation of man's freedom or a violation of his self. Section 55 seems to be a direct response to Häring and the revisionist view of conscience. It speaks of those who:

stress the *complexity* typical of the phenomenon of conscience, a complexity profoundly related to the whole sphere of psychology and the emotions, and to the numerous influences exerted by the individual's social and cultural environment. On the other hand, they give maximum attention to the value of conscience, which the Council itself defined as "the sanctuary of man, where he is alone with God whose voice echoes within him." This voice, it is said, leads man not so much to a meticulous observance of universal norms as to a creative and responsible acceptance of the personal tasks entrusted to him by God.<sup>57</sup>

In their desire to emphasize the "creative" character of conscience, certain authors no longer call its actions "judgments" but "decisions"; only by making these decisions "autonomously" would man be able to attain moral maturity. Some even hold that this process of maturing is inhibited by the excessively categorical position adopted by the Church's Magisterium in many moral questions; for them, the Church's interventions are the cause of unnecessary *conflicts of conscience*.<sup>58</sup>

*Veritatis splendor* goes on to say that the erroneous view of conscience it is rejecting leads to permitting persons

to do in practice and in good conscience what is qualified as intrinsically evil by the moral law. A separation, or even an opposition, is thus established in some cases between the teaching of the precept, which is valid in general, and the norm of the individual conscience, which would in fact make the final decision about what is good and what is evil.<sup>59</sup>

Revisionists would likely protest that they are not approving the choice to do intrinsically evil actions, since the agent does not consider the action to be intrinsically evil. In their view an action can be wrong and moral at the same

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<sup>57</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 55. (emphasis in the original)

<sup>59</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 56.

time.<sup>60</sup>

Not only is the revisionists' and discerners' view of conscience very different from the tradition, but it also fails to conform to the way that Jesus welcomed and accompanied those who approached him in respect to moral matters. *Veritatis splendor* gives primacy of place to the encounter of the rich young man with Jesus. He asks what *Veritatis splendor* depicts as "an essential and unavoidable question for the life of every man": "What must I do to gain eternal life?"<sup>61</sup> Jesus does not seek to discover what moral commitments the young man has made. Instead, without hesitation he tells him he must follow the commandments, a rather black and white approach to matters, an approach that, in the eyes of some, it seems, could be portrayed as somewhat harsh. The young man asks for specificity and Jesus recites some of the commandments to him. When the young man states he has done these, Jesus does not try to discover if the young man has been following these in a robotic way, in blind obedience to authority — though according to *Veritatis splendor*, he has not been. *Veritatis splendor* states that the young man "has followed the moral ideal seriously and generously from childhood."<sup>62</sup> Jesus makes a challenge that it would be hard for anyone to embrace, especially a rich young man. He states, "If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me" (Mt 19:21).<sup>63</sup>

It could be said that features of Jesus's approach do not conform to some of the advice given in *Amoris laetitia*, which states:

Moral education entails asking of a child or a young person only those things that do not involve a disproportionate sacrifice, and demanding only a degree of effort that will not lead to resentment or coercion. Ordinarily this is done by proposing small steps that can be understood, accepted and appreciated, while including a proportionate sacrifice. Otherwise, by demanding too much, we gain nothing.<sup>64</sup>

The young man does not accept Jesus's challenge to give away all his

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<sup>60</sup> For a good review of possible positions on the meaning of "erroneous conscience" see Brian V. Johnston, "Erroneous Conscience in *Veritatis splendor* and the Theological Tradition" in *The Splendor of Accuracy*, ed. Joseph A. Selling and Jan Jans (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 115-35, especially pp. 128-29.

<sup>61</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 8.

<sup>62</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 16

<sup>63</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 16.

<sup>64</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 271.

possessions and follow Jesus. Rather, he walks away, just as many walked away when Jesus explained the Eucharist to them. Jesus does not run after him and counsel him to do the best that he can. The challenge remains. *Veritatis splendor* speaks of this encounter as portraying the kind of growth in moral maturity that we must all go through:

*Perfection demands that maturity in self-giving to which human freedom is called. Jesus points out to the young man that the commandments are the first and indispensable condition for having eternal life.... [Jesus's invitation to the young man] reveals the particular dynamic of freedom's growth towards maturity, and at the same time they bear witness to the fundamental relationship between freedom and divine law. Human freedom and God's law are not in opposition; on the contrary, they appeal one to the other. The follower of Christ knows that his vocation is to freedom.*<sup>65</sup>

As *Veritatis splendor* states, freedom begins with obedience to the commandments. Being obedient to the commandments is the foundation for a more radical adventure, the adventure of "partaking in the life and destiny" of Jesus, "sharing in his free and loving obedience to the will of the Father."<sup>66</sup>

A thoughtful reading of Scripture should lead the reader to ask: "Is there anything in Jesus's words or behavior that suggest that he would share the discerners' view of conscience?" Of the view that it is more important to be sincere and act in accord with one's own values than to be obedient to the objective norms of the Gospel? Jesus clearly believed His greatest achievement was being obedient to the Father in all things, something that came with enormous price. Of nothing was He more determined; in his view, nothing He said or did glorified God more. Jesus called His disciples to become one with Him and a means and a result of becoming one with Him would be the submission of their wills to God in all things. In His encounters with sinners, He admonished them to "go and sin no more" not to be true to their "selves."

#### Legitimate Pastoral Techniques

It is important to note that some of the techniques of moral formation and "accompanying" mentioned in *Amoris laetitia* have legitimate uses in educating youth, especially in preparation for reception of the sacraments, in spiritual direction or the confessional, and in pastoral counseling. *Amoris laetitia* speaks of such techniques as showing young people how behaving morally is to their

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<sup>65</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> *Veritatis splendor*, 19.

advantage<sup>67</sup> and of the use of the principle of the law of gradualness.<sup>68</sup>

There are certainly times when the pastor may follow the principle of the law of gradualness and postpone pressing the force of an objective absolute universal norm. For instance, often in marriage preparation when a pastor learns that the couple he is preparing for marriage is already engaging in sexual intercourse, he may wait until a later meeting, after he has established a relationship with them, to help them to understand that they are not living in accord with God's plan for sexuality. Initially, he may find it helpful to stress that scientific studies show that marriages preceded by cohabitation are more likely to end in divorce rather than trying to get them to fully understand the Church's full view of marriage. He may wait until after the couple decide to separate before marriage to discuss with them the immorality of contraception, again, possibly stressing the bad health effects for the woman and its effectiveness more than its incompatibility with the procreative and unitive meanings of marriage.

Discerning the morality about attending the weddings of Catholics living in irregular situations or getting married outside of the Church requires great prudence. One of my friends told her brother that she could not attend his wedding unless he stopped cohabiting with his fiancée before the wedding. He was not happy with her "threat," but he and his fiancée reconsidered, stopped cohabiting, and eventually become devout Catholics and grateful to his sister. Other friends of mine, arguably overly strict Catholics, after much prayer and consultation decided, against powerful "instincts," to attend the out-of-the-Church wedding of their oldest son because they believe their younger children would interpret them as being hateful and rebel should they not attend. That son eventually came back to the Church and the parents maintained a decent relationship with their younger children. I have even known devout Catholic parents with younger children in the house, who allowed an older son to live with his girlfriend in their home. They were confident they could convey to the son and the younger children that they disapproved of his behavior. Their intent was to remain close to him and to have multiple opportunities to persuade their son to marry his girlfriend. Surely that is a technique to be used rarely but within the realm of prudent strategy.

Discernment about prudential matters is no easy task but one sure rule is that one never does evil to achieve good. The laws of the Gospel, of the

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<sup>67</sup> See *Amoris laetitia*, 265.

<sup>68</sup> See *Amoris laetitia*, 295.

Church, and of natural law that are universal and absolute, they cannot be set aside in pursuit of other goods.

As legitimate as some of the pastoral techniques are in *Amoris laetitia*, unfortunately, the discerners might find some support in Section 7 on the education of children for their understanding of the place of “norms” in moral formation and judgment. Indeed, comparing some of those principles with others found in the Pontifical Council for the Family’s document *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*<sup>69</sup> will demonstrate how different views of conscience yield different principles for formation and discernment.

*Amoris laetitia* states that “[moral formation] should...take place inductively, so that children can learn for themselves the importance of certain values, principles and norms, rather than by imposing these as absolute and unquestionable truths.”<sup>70</sup> Revisionists may find in this passage a reflection of their aversion to “deduction” as a method that somehow is not open to the dynamism of experience. While there is no denying that a heavy-handed education in absolutes is inadvisable and while “induction” is a means for discovering truth, the tradition certainly holds that deduction has its place. Our minds are naturally logical, so deductive argument can be very effective; for instance, it works quite well to teach the immorality of abortion by moving from the naturally known absolute moral truth that it is wrong deliberately and willingly to take an innocent human life, to providing a demonstration of the humanity of the unborn and moving to a recognition that abortion is always wrong. The same could be done for many truths, such as the denial of fundamental human rights to those who differ from us in ethnicity or race: once we realize all human beings no matter what race or ethnicity share the same essence and that our rights are rooted in our essence, certain important truths can be readily deduced.

As noted in Section 271 above, *Amoris Laetitia* seems to counsel against challenging people to submit themselves to a morality that they find to be demanding. The advice given in *Amoris laetitia* may not have universal application: while, by definition, demands for unreasonable sacrifices are unwise, many a parent has found that the only way for some children to make

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<sup>69</sup> Pontifical Council for the Family, *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality, Guidelines for Education within the Family* (December 8, 1995) at [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/family/documents/rc\\_pc\\_family\\_doc\\_08121995\\_human-sexuality\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/family/documents/rc_pc_family_doc_08121995_human-sexuality_en.html).

<sup>70</sup> *Amoris laetitia*, 264.

progress in the moral life is to put up with resentment and to have recourse to the coercion of punishment. The major difference between the advice given from moral formation in *Amoris laetitia* and that in *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* is that the latter speaks many times of the need to learn to sacrifice, to gain self-control<sup>71</sup> and self-mastery<sup>72</sup> and also of the appeal of universal absolute moral norms. *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* is confident that young people can grasp and dedicate themselves to challenging moral truths because (as *Veritas splendor* repeatedly maintains), they are written on our countenances. Moreover, we have access to grace that will make up for our weaknesses. The *Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* states:

As its departure point, the formation of conscience requires being enlightened about: God's project of love for every single person, the positive and liberating value of the moral law, and awareness both of the weakness caused by sin and the means of grace which strengthen us on our path towards the good and towards salvation....<sup>73</sup>

The formation of conscience requires being enlightened about the truth and God's plan and must not be confused with a vague subjective feeling or with personal opinion. In answering children's questions, parents should offer well-reasoned arguments about the great value of chastity and show the intellectual and human weakness of theories that inspire permissive and hedonistic behavior.<sup>74</sup>

Whereas *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality* speaks of the God's law repeated,<sup>75</sup> in the section 271 of *Amoris* there is no explicit mention of God as lawgiver there or in the following sections through 286. If all law given to us from the Lord God is ultimately for our flourishing, it would be important to reflect on that truth when considering moral education.

### Conclusion

This essay has focused on the radically different understanding of conscience held by the discerners and the tradition of the Church. But, of course, the divide goes deeper. Ultimately the question is what criteria are to be used to determine the rightness or wrongness of an action.<sup>76</sup> Discerners are

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<sup>71</sup> See *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 5, 31, 55, and 58.

<sup>72</sup> See *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 8, 18, 55, and 58.

<sup>73</sup> *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 95.

<sup>74</sup> *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 95-96.

<sup>75</sup> *The Truth and Meaning of Human Sexuality*, 29, 54, 73, 95, 140.

<sup>76</sup> In truth, the ultimate questions are metaphysical – are there enduring essences



primarily concerned that an action should be representative of the moral agent's highest values. They talk about accompanying a person in the moral life but give no indication where that accompanying should take them. They reject the traditional understanding of natural law, Scripture and the magisterium as authorities because all of them, in their view, are historically and culturally conditioned. As noted, the discerners also allow for the possibility that a decision of the moral agent in conflict with the moral teaching of the Church may in fact be the result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit and thus be prophetic. Yet, how is it to be determined which decisions are guided by the Holy Spirit and which are prophetic? Won't all those decisions also be historically or culturally conditioned? Do the discerners hope to return to the time when moral theologians were the ones who decide which actions are moral and which not? What guarantees that those judgments are not historically and culturally determined? Or in the end, is that all we have? Do we merely have historically and culturally conditioned "truths" and thus, relativism with all its inherent problems and incompatibility with Church teaching?

The application of this reasoning to *Humanae vitae* is clear. Indeed, we do not need to speculate how it will be applied by discerners. Rev. Maurizio Chiodi, a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, basing his reasoning on *Amoris laetitia*, tells us that there are circumstances that make the use of contraception obligatory.<sup>77</sup> A popular e-magazine reports on an address that he gave:

The Italian moral theologian explained that "normally, the objective is identified with the moral norm known by reason and the subjective is identified with the conscience enlightened by the law." But he rejected this idea, arguing instead that "the relationship between objective and subjective is not a relationship between the norm known by reason and the conscience" but "between the act...and conscience." The task for philosophers and theologians, Chiodi said, is to "rethink a theory of conscience" that recovers "the original link between conscience and the moral act."<sup>78</sup>

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and natures of things and actions that dictate how they are to be used and treated? If so, the traditional morality of the Church as a strong claim to truth and the historicist view of revisionists is very much threatened. But few revisionists even allude to the metaphysical presuppositions of their claims, let alone labor to justify them.

<sup>77</sup> *Lifesitenews*, "New Academy of Life Member uses *Amoris* to say some circumstances 'require' use of contraception," (January 8, 2018) at <https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/new-academy-for-life-member-uses-amoris-to-say-some-circumstances-require-c>.

<sup>78</sup> *Lifesitenews*, "New Academy of Life Member."

The assumptions behind Chiodi's understanding of how *Humanae vitae* should be read in light of *Amoris Laetitia* are precisely those identified in the course of this essay. The conscience is the self and it is the job of the conscience to discern the best that it can do in light of one's personal circumstances; there is no necessity to try to conform one's behavior to external norms both because abiding by external norms reduces the authenticity of an action and because the norms are social constructs.

Those who would defend *Humanae vitae* in face of the modern challenges to it, must understand how radically the view of conscience (and moral norms, natural law, authority, and so on) is from that of the magisterium and shape their arguments accordingly.