



## The Priest as Moral Educator and Pastoral Moral Guide

*Because of forms of conditioning and mitigating factors, it is possible that in an objective situation of sin—which may not be subjectively culpable, or fully such—a person can be living in God’s grace, can love and can also grow in the life of grace and charity, while receiving the Church’s help to this end. Discernment must help to find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits. By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification, which give glory to God. Let us remember that “a small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order, but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties.” The practical pastoral care of ministers and of communities must not fail to embrace this reality (Pope Francis – *Amoris Laetitia* 305).*



In an age of rampant individualism, faith asks that we stand for family and community. In a time of intense consumerism, faith summons us to uphold the principle that it is not what we have that counts, but rather how we treat one another with dignity. In an epoch that does not value permanence or hard work in relationships, faith demands that we believe marriage is forever and children are a blessing, not a burden. In an era of growing isolation, we are reminded by our faith that our nation has a responsibility to the bigger world, to pursue peace, to welcome immigrants, to protect the lives of the lost, the least, and the last, to live by the principle of solidarity. In a stage where the gap between the rich and poor continuously widens, our faith insists on its authenticity in our lives by how we treat and care for the weakest among us.

During these challenging times, the Catholic community needs to be a source of clear moral vision and effective action. As community, our faith calls us to be the “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (cf. Mt 5:13-16). This is the task of every believer, parish, and Christian community. Moral vision and effective action for social undertaking can only come about through an effective moral education. Moral education is an essential part of what makes a parish Catholic.

In urban neighborhoods, in suburban communities, and in rural areas, parishes serve as anchors of hope and communities of caring, help families meet their own needs and reach out to others, and serve as centers of community life and networks of assistance.

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Evangelii Gaudium* further appreciates the role of the parish today:

*The parish is not an outdated institution; precisely because it possesses great flexibility, it can assume quite different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community. While certainly not the only institution which evangelizes, if the parish proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptability, it continues to be*

*“the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”. This presumes that it really is in contact with the homes and the lives of its people, and does not become a useless structure out of touch with people or a self-absorbed group made up of a chosen few. The parish is the presence of the Church in a given territory, an environment for hearing God’s word, for growth in the Christian life, for dialogue, proclamation, charitable outreach, worship, and celebration. In all its activities the parish encourages and trains its members to be evangelizers. It is a community of communities, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a center of constant missionary outreach. We must admit, though, that the call to review and renew our parishes has not yet sufficed to bring them nearer to people, to make them environments of living communion and participation, and to make them completely mission-oriented (no. 28).*

Reflecting on these words of Pope Francis, we can see that the parish community has a special role in promoting participation in the life, mission, and work of the faith community.

The parish is where the Church lives. The parish, locally organized under the guidance of a pastor who takes the place or stead of a bishop, is a community of faith, of action, and of hope, enlightened and supported by the Word of God, given the task of proclamation and catechesis that reveal the mystery of Christ in its fullness and implications. It is where the Gospel is proclaimed and celebrated, where believers are formed and sent to renew the earth. The parish is the home of the Christian community; it is the heart of our Church. The parish is the place where God’s people meet Jesus in word and sacrament and come in touch with the source of the Church’s life. The parish is a community of love where the reality of communion is lived out in concrete actions. Its point of departure is the Eucharist through which sisterhood and

brotherhood of the disciples of Lord are transformed into service, reciprocal love, and witness. It is a community of prayer, especially on the Day of the Lord, through the action of the sacraments being celebrated, particularly the Eucharist which is the source and summit of the liturgical action.

The above understanding of the parish truly seals the centrality of the parish in the formation of the faithful. The parish, the Church that lives among the homes of the people, continues to be the fundamental place for the communication of the Gospel and the formation of the consciences of the believers. Within a given territory, it represents the immediate reference to education and Christian life on the level accessible to all. It favors exchange and encounter among the different generations. It dialogues with local institutions and it establishes educational alliances in service of humanity.

In this context, directly touching us and investing us with responsibility, the role of the priest becomes clear. He is the guide of the community who constitutes and focuses on the parochial organization in his structural plan. Moral formation or education is one function of the priest worth special mention. Inevitably, the priest is at the center of the renewed attempt ensuring that the parish becomes a permanent laboratory in the building of the Christian way of life—individual and communitarian. He must possess competence—native, developed, and exercised or applied.

It is precisely in the understanding of the important roles of the parish priest in the Christian community that this discussion wants to focus its reflection. There are three roles considered important for the parish priest fulfill: moral education and pastoral moral guidance, prophecy, and healing. We shall take only first role in this discussion.

*Understanding the Deeper Meaning of the Term “Pastoral”*

In the last century, the word *pastoral* progressively extends to the ministry proper to priests. The term “pastoral” comes from the Latin, *pastor*, meaning shepherd. It thus refers to the work and concern of the shepherd for his sheep. Jesus referred to himself as “the Good Shepherd,” and to those who believe in him, as his “sheep,” so the word “pastoral” is founded on the very words of Christ. St. Paul’s Letters to Timothy and Titus, 1 and 2, are known as the “pastoral epistles” since they present a series of practical directives for the proper pastoral care of the Christian communities at Ephesus and Crete. Even Vatican II’s *Gaudium et Spes*, The Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World, footnoted the word “pastoral” in order to highlight the direction the Church would take vis-à-vis the world at large.<sup>1</sup> In the light of these insights, we can say that the word pastoral includes everything connected with the priestly ministry to the faithful; it is a practical science which tries to apply the revealed truths of our faith, and the directives of the Magisterium, to the problems of daily living. Thus, the pastoral priest, according to this understanding, is a practical man who instructs and helps his people lead fully a Christian life so that they can finally attain eternal salvation.

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<sup>1</sup>It is good to note that *Gaudium et Spes* is the only official document of the Church that gave a footnote to explain something about its title. The first footnote of *Gaudium Spes* says this: “The Pastoral Constitution “*De Ecclesia in Mundo Huius Temporis*” is made up of two parts; yet it constitutes an organic unity. By way of explanation: the constitution is called “pastoral” because, while resting on doctrinal principles, it seeks to express the relation of the Church to the world and modern mankind. The result is that, on the one hand, a pastoral slant is present in the first part, and, on the other hand, a doctrinal slant is present in the second part. In the first part, the Church develops her teaching on man, on the world which is the enveloping context of man’s existence, and on man’s relations to his fellow men. In part two, the Church gives closer consideration to various aspects of modern life and human society; special consideration is given to those questions and problems which, in this general area, seem to have a greater urgency in our day. As a result in part two the subject matter which is viewed in the light of doctrinal principles is made up of diverse elements. Some elements have a permanent value; others, only a transitory one. Consequently, the constitution must be interpreted according to the general norms of theological interpretation. Interpreters must bear in mind—especially in part two—the changeable circumstances which the subject matter, by its very nature, involves.”

Karl Rahner calls this priestly praxis “the self-actualization of the Church” that brings about the salvation of God in the world.<sup>2</sup> This self-actualization happens and must happen both from within the permanent essence of the Church and from within the situation of the world. It is something the Church must explain in pastoral theology. In this sense, the word “pastoral” refers not only to the pastoral act of priests but also to the salvific act of the Church in general. The two are considered to be inseparable.

In our time, this perspective is generally accepted. It is an insight assumed in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no. 57 which makes reference to the pastoral formation by priests:

*It needs to be studied therefore as the true and genuine theological discipline that it is pastoral or practical theology. It is a scientific reflection on the Church as she is built up daily, by the power of the Spirit, in history; on the Church as the “universal sacrament of salvation,” as a living sign and instrument of the salvation wrought by Christ through the word, the sacraments and the service of charity. Pastoral theology is not just an art. Nor is it a set of exhortations, experiences, and methods. It is theological in its own right, because it receives from the faith the principles and criteria for the pastoral action of the Church in history, a Church that each day “begets” the Church herself, to quote the felicitous expression of the Venerable Bede: “Nam et Ecclesia quotidie gignit Ecclesiam.”*

In the context of the sacrament of penance, the word *pastoral* refers to the action generally called *pastoral care* or *care of soul*. Vatican II strictly limits this pastoral duty to the ordained ministers: bishops (LG 20), priests (PO 13), and deacons (LG 20). Both

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<sup>2</sup>A more detailed articulation of the understanding of the world pastoral is found in the Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Dictionary of Theology* (Munich: Herder, 1985). See also H. Schuster, “Pastoral Theology”, in *Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi*, edited by K. Rahner, (Freiburg: Burns & Oates 1975).

*Optatam Totius* (OT)<sup>3</sup> and *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (PDV)<sup>4</sup> highlight the importance of pastoral formation of those preparing for the priesthood. This preparation must be imbued by pastoral charity.

Pastoral charity may be understood as participation in the Good Shepherd's pastoral charity. It is a free gift from the Holy Spirit and a task and responsibility calling for a free and committed response. Pastoral charity is the virtue by which we imitate the self-giving and service of Christ. Thus, its essential content is the total gift of the self to the Church following Christ's giving of himself to humanity. Reducing pastoral charity only to what we do is not enough because it is really the gift of self by which we express Christ's love for his flock. In other words, it defines the way we think, act, and relate to people. If this is pastoral charity, then it definitely imposes special demands from the priests.

Included in the understanding of pastoral characteristic proper to the priest is his role as a teacher or an educator. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the *Directory for the Ministry and Life Priest*, issued by the Congregation for the Clergy in January 31, 1994 affirms this.

Priests therefore, *as educators in the faith*, must see to it either by themselves or through others that the faithful are led individually in the Holy Spirit to a development of their own vocation according to the Gospel, to a sincere and practical charity, and to that freedom with which Christ has made us free. *Ceremonies however beautiful, or associations however flourishing, will be of little value if they are not directed toward the education of men to Christian maturity.* In furthering this, priests should help men to see what is required and what is God's will in the important and unimportant events of life. Also, Christians should be taught that they live not only for themselves, but, according to the demands of the new law

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<sup>3</sup>“Here the entire training of the students should be oriented to the formation of true shepherds of souls after the model of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest, and shepherd” (OT 4).

<sup>4</sup>“The whole formation imparted to candidates for the priesthood aims at preparing them to enter into communion with the charity of Christ the good shepherd” (PDV 57).

of charity; as every man has received grace, he must administer the same to others. In this way, all will discharge in a Christian manner their duties in the community of men.

*The office of pastor is not confined to the care of the faithful as individuals, but also in a true sense is extended to the formation of a genuine Christian community (no. 6).*

The priest as pastor has the duty of being an educator of his community. To his members in faith and fellow co-journeymen in Christian life, he teaches, gives witness, and accompanies the faithful in discerning the will of God in their lives, asking them to grow in charity and calling their attention to the seriousness of their Christian existence.

Although *PO* no. 6 does not speak formally of moral education, this does not mean that this matter is not considered, particularly when it mentions about accompaniment of persons in particular to whom priests are called to ensure that moral discernment be in accord with the events of their lives. In sum, it is safe to say that moral education is really an essential part of education in general.

There is nothing in *PO* no. 6 that says other things regarding the pastoral life of the pastor than the care of the sick sheep, not physically but morally. In short, they are to take care of sinners. This work of caring is expressed through the sacraments, particularly in the Sacrament of Penance.

### *The Priest as a Moral Educator*

Moral education aims at forming the moral personality. Precisely, it is a personality capable of being oriented autonomously and responsibly to value. Moreover, it is able to maintain in all situations, a life of fidelity to recognized and prized values and their efficacious realization. Because the human person can reach this end, he or she must grow as a responsible subject in knowledge, love, and persevering action vis-à-vis the good and valuable.



In this regard, we can talk about the three dimension of moral education: cognitive dimension (the educator opens up to rational knowledge of values and the derived rules/norms); affective dimension (the educator brings about or favors the movement toward interior and deep adhesion to perceived and/or known values); and the practical/behavioral dimension (the educator stimulates, promotes, and expresses the efficacious realization of values in the history of an individual or a society).

These dimensions define the space where moral education inevitably moves about if it wants to actualize or be faithful to its tasks, assuming different forms in relation to the dimension emerging as necessary and opportune in a specific context. These forms can be enumerated differently and described according to varied cultures; they can receive different definitions depending on the educational competence of those subjects being educated. Indeed, there is no doubt about the possibility of achieving a true moral education capable of showing the rationality and human force of values not only cognitively but also through witness of one's own life. Moral education ought to strengthen love for values, learning their beauty and fascination; it must teach how to be on guard against evil, to struggle against it, and to open the path to one who is lost by stimulating real recognition of one's responsibility and obligation in justice toward reparation.

In our theological and moral tradition all this can be adequately put together by dwelling on the three images which are biblically founded and anthropologically recognized in breadth and significance. Here we are referring to the images of teacher, prophet, and healer. These images describe in detail the moral educational role of a priest in a Christian community.

It is imperative that we make a further important note before ending this discourse. When formal moral education reaches its end, the educator loses that particular role. This factum does not mean that he cannot take on other roles with a moral content, e.g., help by way of accompaniment or moral counseling. Hence, there is an opening that arises calling for a new competence for fulfilling

the new role. The name given to this new role is “pastoral moral guidance.” Pastoral moral guidance can coincide with spiritual direction at times but not necessarily.<sup>5</sup>

### *Pastoral Moral Guidance*

#### *The Priest as a Moral Guide*

What we are dealing in this section has its location in the birth of the practice of pastoral counseling. Counseling is a pastoral practice that has received particular attention and elaboration in the English culture. Pastoral counseling considers the confluence between pastoral action and psychological insights in accompanying the faithful in difficult and trying times in their lives.

Even if this confluence has its roots in antiquity—we could find signs of it in early Christianity—the term pastoral counseling is a recent category.<sup>6</sup> Its development is generally traceable to the work of Seward Hiltner entitled, *Pastoral Counseling*.<sup>7</sup> John Patton understands pastoral counseling “as a special type of pastoral care offered in response to individuals, couples or families who experience and are capable of verbalizing the pains and sorrows in their life and have the will to seek pastoral help to confront them. A pastoral counselor is a person dedicated and prepared for religious ministry so as to work in a context proper to it and within a specific religious community. A big part of pastoral counseling is done by ordained priests and religious sisters as part of the ministry

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<sup>5</sup>The Congregation for the Clergy in 2011 issued the document entitled *The Priest, Minister of Divine Mercy: Aid for Confessors and Spiritual Directors*. The document teases out well the difference between confession and spiritual direction in order to help priests in pastorally accompanying those who come to them for pastoral guidance.

<sup>6</sup>John Patton, “Pastoral Counseling,” in *Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling*, edited by Rodney J. Hunter, et al. (Nashville, Abingdon Press, 1990), 849-854.

<sup>7</sup>Seward Hiltner was one of the influential writers during the ‘50s was Seward. Although he acknowledged that pastoral counseling had the same ultimate aim as other dimensions of pastoral work—that of bringing people to Christian faith and the Christian fellowship, where those goals were “relevant”—Hiltner defined the special aim of pastoral counseling in more flexible terms, virtually indistinguishable from those of secular counseling: He said that pastoral counseling is “The attempt by a pastor to help people help themselves through the process of gaining understanding of their inner conflicts.” See Seward Hiltner, *Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 12. This work is just republication of his famous work in 1949 entitled *How Every Pastor Can Help People Help Themselves*.

in parishes, hospitals, and in other authorized contexts opened to them.”<sup>8</sup>

This particular ministerial understanding of pastoral counseling is one that guides the description and definition of John Patton. He understands pastoral counseling not as profession but a function done by persons who have the ministry as profession. What distinguishes pastoral counseling from other forms of counseling and psychotherapy is the role and the responsibility of the counselor and his or her understanding and expression of the pastoral relationship. The pastoral counselors represent the central image of life and its meaning as affirmed by their religious communities. This emphasis on the relationship with the religious community through a representative person distinguishes pastoral counseling from religious counseling in general and other types of secular psychotherapy.<sup>9</sup>

In this context, it becomes inevitable that pastoral counseling would also touch on the moral dimension of human existence. More often the vital difficulties experienced have a moral form and they are structured as conflicts, uncertainties, and moral dilemmas. In this regard, there came the need to pay attention to moral problems arising from and constituting part of what is important in the same dynamism of pastoral counseling. This indication is expressed in many ways. One of the expressions is moral dilemmas in pastoral perspective.

In the theological and moral field the notion of pastoral moral guidance prevails through the enhancement of its value in Christian life. Richard Gula is one author who has contributed a lot in this discourse.<sup>10</sup> Gula understands this expression to indicate a moral guidance-counseling which the priest exercises to help

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<sup>8</sup>Patton, “Pastoral Counseling,” 849.

<sup>9</sup>Patton, “Pastoral Counseling,” 850.

<sup>10</sup>See the four works of Richard Gula, *What Are They Saying about Moral Norm?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), 106-111; *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989); *Moral Discernment* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); and *To Walk Together Again: Sacrament of Reconciliation* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984).

the faithful in the discernment process toward moral decision making in situations where there is moral complexity and when the modality of application of the regular moral norms is not clear.

At the beginning of the 1980s, Gula started to give special attention to this aspect of the ethical ministry of the priest. He noted the link it has with the change in the paradigm of thinking regarding norms and the moral choice as indicated by the renewal of Vatican II. The moral theology of the manuals explained the relationship between moral norms and the moral choice in terms of a syllogism: the major premise of the syllogism offers the norms while the minor indicates the actual situation, that is, the judgment of conscience. The application of the major premise is done deductively. According to Gula, the revisionists (moral theologians who seriously pursued the renewal in moral theology after Vatican II, e.g. B. Häring, R. McCormick, D. Maguire) assert that the moral choice is both an art and a science. In other words, the moral situations are so complex that the moral norms ought to be applied with imagination and wisdom.

From the revisionist point of view, the moral choice searches for the realization of values. The values are primary rather than the norms. An authentic moral life conforms to a moral conscience that is properly informed. It is not a matter of strict observance of moral norms or is it an arbitrary or capricious response to every situation. For moral life to be authentic it is a question of realizing values which merit preference in a critical, responsible, and loving way. To determine which values merit preference in a conflict situation, there is need for an evaluation of the presence or absence of *proportionate reasons* in the concrete circumstances.<sup>11</sup>

The process of discernment and of moral choice is not easy; it demands seriousness and diligence. According to Gula, it calls for at least four considerations. In this connection, he uses the insights of James M. Gustafson, a Protestant moral theologian of the 1970s, who identified four elements in his scheme of moral discernment:

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<sup>11</sup>Gula, *What Are They Saying*, 107-108.

*the moral agent; beliefs; situational analysis; and criteria of judgment.*<sup>12</sup> These are schematized in an ongoing cycle.

The *moral agent* is the “I” that strives to realize what ought to be done by looking at the all the aspects of one’s life. Moral theology gives these aspects a more technical category—the person adequately considered. In a nutshell, a person adequately considered is a relational and historical being, an embodied subject, and equal with the other fellow human beings but fundamentally unique. Each of these characteristics impinges on a moral judgment a moral agent makes. Therefore, a moral judgment truly becomes just and considerate of human dignity when it is based on the comprehensive reality of the person. Put simply, an action is morally right if it is beneficial to the person adequately considered in himself or herself (this means as an unique and embodied spirit) and in his or her relationships (this means relations to others, to social structures, to the material world and to God).

Moral action must be attentive to *beliefs*, or stable convictions. These are the ones shaping the person’s self-understanding and ability to consider what is possible to do. Moreover, the beliefs also serve as tests or challenges to the person’s consistency in his or her integrity and identity.

Without a clear grasp of the reality, the moral hand will certainly grope. Hence, the need for an *analysis of the situation* arises. Thorough analysis or exploration of a given reality will reveal questions and issues that are important in conscience formation and decision-making. Besides, it also helps in determining the presence of aggravating and mitigating circumstance surrounding the issue or conflict as well as the proportionate reason to pursue the action or not.

The process does not stop in the analysis of a given reality because a practical moral thinking pursues a consultation with other sources of moral wisdom. This consultation means *analyzing the situation* by exploring as thoroughly as possible the

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 108.

reality-revealing questions, such as the one's we asked in forming conscience for decision making. Moreover, the proper assessment of proportionate reason demands a clear knowledge of the circumstances which surround the situations of conflict. Besides an analysis of the situation, practical moral thinking consults various sources of moral wisdom. Moral consultation demands appeal to the *criteria of judgment* like the Scriptures, human experience, the teaching of the church, and the witness of the lives of the saints and holy men and women. Moral norms are very helpful in this process of consultation, for they are the generalized expressions of inference from a broad experience of value. However, appealing to moral norms does not conclude the process. The discerning moral person must see to it that the full force of Christian beliefs and commitments impacts on the moral analysis and the evaluation and selection of alternatives for action. By exploring beliefs at this stage will bring us back to the person who ultimately must decide and act. As we can see the four points of moral analysis are very demanding or arduous.<sup>13</sup>

### *Toward an Understanding of Pastoral Moral Guidance*

We can find the more developed reflection of Gula regarding *pastoral moral guidance* in his work entitled *Moral Discernment* published in 1997.<sup>14</sup> In this work, Gula considers pastoral moral guidance to be concerned with the moral capacities of the person including the extent of his or her knowledge to act according to moral standards the lead him or her to the ultimate goal of loving God and the neighbor. At the heart of pastoral moral guidance is to address an immediate dilemma confronting a particular person by asking this fundamental question: Given where you are now what is the next step you can take to realize the ultimate goal of fulfilling the twofold commandment of love? Probing into the message behind this question, one can surmise that pastoral moral guidance

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<sup>13</sup>R. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 305-306.

<sup>14</sup>The theme of pastoral guidance is discussed thoroughly on pages 105-130 of that work.

is directed toward the best possible moral option or achievement of the person for now, while encouraging and supporting his or her openness and growth toward the goal of fulfilling the love of God and neighbor.

Pastoral moral guidance is different from moral theology. Moral theology is particularly concerned with objective pole of morality while pastoral moral guidance focuses mainly on the subjective pole. The subjective pole of morality strictly means the person's conscience. It does not in any way allude to abstract moral principles. Moreover, it deals with human conduct that arises from the person's capacity of knowledge, freedom, and emotion to uphold moral values, to commit oneself to them, and to choose them willfully. The main preoccupation of pastoral moral guidance is the subject's ability to fulfill the objective moral order. That means that what it is trying to achieve is the best expression of the human goods which the person can do or make in order to fulfill the demands of love.

As Christians, to love one another as God has loved is a norm we are obliged to follow at all times. However, we all know that there is a limit to what can be done by each person at each time to authentically respect and love the self and others. Refusing to accept this limitation is to demand perfect love from imperfect creatures. In the light of this insight, what pastoral moral guidance upholds is that we are in the process of perfection and in this condition to face the reality of human sinfulness and to accept our limited ability to love is not to dissolve the Gospel demand but to recognize that we are still in need of conversion.<sup>15</sup>

While we do assert the difference of pastoral moral guidance from moral theology, this does not mean that their objectives are different for each other. Both of them seek moral truth expressed in this manner: What ought I to be and what ought I to do in order to respond to the call of God to be loving? However, each them will have different approaches to the question. Moral theology will

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<sup>15</sup>Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 108.

look into the good and evil features of a moral action taken in its totality and the presence or absence of proportionate reason to determine if an action is moral or not when it does not consider the person's particular situation of conflict and sin. On the other hand, pastoral moral guidance considers the person and his or her situation in order to determine what is the good that is achievable for now.<sup>16</sup>

Pastoral moral guidance, a modality that is proper to pastoral ministry may seem to be a thing new. However, it is not. This was already taught in the past as a pastoral approach complementing the *praxis confessarii*. It corresponds to the practice of internal forum in a non-sacramental encounter to address a particular moral conflict or dilemma besetting a penitent. At the heart of the internal forum solution is the practice to extend the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance outside the confessional for a more detailed discernment of the situation of the penitent in order to merit a favorable compassionate understanding in their situation and on the merit of the strict and unavoidable conditions, the confessor opens up possibilities to them, e.g., the reception of communion given their situations.

Internal forum is a process of accompaniment and discernment which guides the faithful to an awareness of their situation before God. In the internal forum, the conversation with the priest contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and what steps can foster it and make it grow. This discernment can never separate from the Gospel demands of truth and charity, as proposed by the Church. For this discernment to happen, there are conditions that need to be ensured: the following conditions must necessarily be present: humility, discretion and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God's will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it". These attitudes are essential for avoiding the grave danger of misunderstandings,

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<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 109.



such as the notion that any priest can quickly grant “exceptions,” or that some people can obtain sacramental privileges in exchange for favors. When a responsible and tactful person, who does not presume to put his or her own desires ahead of the common good of the Church, meets with a pastor capable of acknowledging the seriousness of the matter before him, there can be no risk that a specific discernment may lead people to think that the Church maintains a double standard.<sup>17</sup>

### *The Principle of Gradualism in Pastoral Moral Guidance*

Traditionally, pastoral guidance follows the principle of gradualism. This means that a person progresses one step at a time toward deeper integration of the demands of objective morality. The call to conversion is a challenge to move beyond the minimum requirements of objective morality and in the light of this, it is the role of the pastoral and moral guide to compassionately treat those who are unable realize for now all requirements of the love God and neighbor or the objective standards of morality. In other word, a sound pastoral moral guidance does not abandon the accepted normative of the community when a particular person cannot measure us to them for now. Moreover, it does not raise to the universal the particular by raising to the level of a general rule the experience and capacity of an individual.

Good pastoral practice upholds the principle that ought implies can. This means that in practice, the pastoral moral guide is not to require from a person a particular obligation in practice no matter how justifiable it may be theoretically if he or she cannot perform it for a good reason. One cannot be forced to do what is beyond his or capacity. In other words, while everyone is always required to do what he or she can, no one is ever required to do what is beyond his or her reach.

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<sup>17</sup>Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 300. This Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, in the section “Gradualness in Pastoral Care” does not introduced anything new regarding the law of gradualism. It simply indicates the already established insights of Familiaris Consortio the law of gradualism.

The preeminent Catholic moral theologian of this century, Bernard Häring, reflects the wisdom of St. Alphonsus Liguori, the patron of moral theologians, in giving this pastoral advice:

*One should never try to impose what the other person cannot sincerely internalize., except the case of preventing grave injustice toward a third person.” We are accountable for doing what is within our capacity, and we are normally culpable for failing to do what we are capable of doing. While the situation may demand a certain kind of response objectively speaking (such as an accident victim’s needing assistance), not everyone is capable of meeting the demands of the situation (two paramedics come upon the scene, but one is so emotionally traumatized as to be unable to respond). So, two people facing the same situation can have different degrees of moral responsibility toward it.<sup>18</sup>*

Another moral theologian, Kevin T. Kelly, further expounds the understanding of the principle or law of gradualism. According to him the Synod of Bishops on the Family in 1983 found great help in the law of gradualism when they were debating about contraception. For Kelly, the law of gradualism refers to a dilemma situation in which there are two different points of focus to be kept in view. However for the present these two cannot be fully aligned to each other. The first focus is the universal value or law which is concerned with the good of human persons in general and which challenges the individual no what is his or her situation. Kelly refers to this as the universal focus. The other focus which he calls the particular focus involves both the individual capacity at this stage of the person’s historical development and any features of his or her particular condition or situation that may have special human significance.

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<sup>18</sup>Quotation cited in Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 109-111.

Elaborating on the meaning of the law of gradualism, Kelly, using the term the law of gradualness instead, says this:

*The law of gradualness is directed towards a growing alignment of the particular with the universal focus. However, it accepts that the particular focus will be the determining one when the individual comes to make his or her personal decision at this point in time in this specific situation. Nevertheless, there will always be something unsatisfactory about any decision in which the particular and the universal focus cannot be properly aligned together. The law of gradualness recognizes that this process of alignment takes time; it is a gradual process. In the case of certain individuals or in some particular circumstances, perhaps it will never be open to more than a partial achievement. Certain values may never be able to be achieved, however gradually, by some persons unless there first occurs some change in the situation in which they have to live their lives and this might be beyond their control and might never occur in their lifetime.<sup>19</sup>*

One must be very careful that the principle of gradualism is not a path towards situation ethics which was already condemned in the 50's by the Church. What this principle provides is theoretical discussion of relevant issues, particularly those living in irregular union. The principle is saying that people can only start from where they are. It is from there where decisions need to be made. In the light of this, the decisions must include their present stage of development on all levels: emotional, psychological, intellectual, moral, and spiritual. What is asked of them is not some kind of decision made by a superman/woman but rather one that is within the limits of one's capabilities.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Kevin T. Kelly, *Divorce and Remarriage: Facing the Challenge, new and expanded edition* (New York: Geoffrey Chapman, 1996), 51.

<sup>20</sup>Kelly, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 51.

Kevin continues:

*What is asked of them is decision which according to their own capacity is rightly made, i.e., it gives due importance to the most important value insofar as they see them.*<sup>21</sup>

Taking the various categories of the Catholic pastoral experience, the language of pastoral moral guidance is still very useful because it affirms clearly the need for objective attention to subjectivity. In other words, this mediation is an essential part of the same educational-moral role of the priest. Only through this process will the moral norm appear as norm for the human person and not vice versa.

### *The Priest and His Role as a Pastoral Moral Guide*

The priest as moral guide ought to take into account this distinction. His identity as priest grows if he grows in maturity in doing this:

*An index of maturing in one's role as a pastoral moral guide is the ability to hold in tension the objective and subjective poles of morality without collapsing one into the other. To sharpen the point, to serve as a moral guide, we need the sensitivity to distinguish between the good that ought to be (as expressed in the objective normative statement of morality) and the good that can only be achieved for now (a pastoral judgment based on one's subjective capacity to choose what is objectively best).*<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Kelly, *Divorce and Remarriage*, 51.

<sup>22</sup>Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 110.

Gula recognizes that this task of the priest is not that easy. He must walk between two poles, the objective and the subjective, which are both important and must be considered in our period of theological and moral pluralism.<sup>23</sup> True it is indeed the subject who must make the decision with his/her conscience fully informed; nevertheless, however, this does not render the task of the priest less difficult. A question is raised to Gula: “Is it possible to have survival kit to be able to move about the complex way?”<sup>24</sup> Positive is Gula’s response and in that regard he offers three indications on the manner by which priest ought to dispense the responsibility. He suggests a structured modality through a model of pastoral moral guidance. The three indications are:

#### 1. Know your Model of Ministry as Moral Guide<sup>25</sup>

Here Gula is dealing with the need to pass from a juridical model to an evangelical model in moral guidance. In the juridical model, the priest is considered to be very good in applying the norms to situation, that is, fitting the proper teaching to a situation. It is that simple. External conformity rather than internalizing values is what characterizes this type of moral guidance. On the other hand, the evangelical model is characterized by an invitation to respond to a moral teaching more than it commands obedience. This model believes that “moral responsibility goes far beyond conforming to detailed instructions. It also believes that responsibility arises out of internalized conditions.”<sup>26</sup> However, for a priest to dispense pastoral moral guidance effectively, he must be able to grasp the truthfulness of the teaching of the Church. To realize this, the teaching must be explained and the learner must be open to it.

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<sup>23</sup>“Pastoral guidance holds in tension the objective norms of morality and the particular person’s capacity for responsibility. In this way it relates moral judgments to pastoral judgments, but does not collapse one into the other. Both moral theology and the pastoral guidance seek the same moral truth of who we are to become and what we are to do in response to God’s call of life. But they differ by engaging different levels of discourse in the process.” See Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith*, 307.

<sup>24</sup>Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 112.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

## 2. Know the Teaching of the Church<sup>27</sup>

Knowing the teaching of the Church is really necessary. Knowledge is not simply to have a checklist of moral principles, but rather to bring out the values and the fundamental content from them. This means, therefore, not simply parroting a council document, an encyclical, or the catechism. One very important thing for Gula is the capacity to distinguish the general principles from prudential applications. These two should not be lumped together. The two have a different binding value. This is also true for the different forms and levels of the magisterium (extraordinary and ordinary or infallible and fallible teaching of the Church).

## 3. Be Familiar with the Theological Debate Surrounding a Teaching<sup>28</sup>

In case there is a theological debate at hand on particular issues, there is need to acknowledge it and to present it fairly. In that situation, it is required to present clearly the teaching of the Church which sometimes does not coincide with the theological opinions. Being conversant with the theological discussions will enable the priest to understand better the position taken by the Church and the reason offered supporting its position. Catholic theology does not deny the presumption of the gift of the Holy Spirit in the magisterium. The Church likewise recognizes that God's Spirit is moving through the community, including the spheres of theology, pastoral ministry and the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful). Caution is to be observed in presenting theological discussion. This means that what are being presented are matters of opinion. A pastoral moral guide must avoid confusing theological and personal opinions with the official teaching of the Church.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup>Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 113-115.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 115-116.

<sup>29</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

On the basis of this, Gula proposes a model in giving pastoral moral guidance which is structured on these three imperatives: Let there be *understanding*! Let there be *encouragement*! Let there be *challenge*!<sup>30</sup> The *understanding* indicates the style of acceptance, listening, and respect that can help people in expressing, relating, and seeing themselves. The *encouragement* signifies help to the person in better self-understanding as to the type of person he/she wants to be. The *challenge* underscores that at times the minister must draw attention to relevant moral truths especially when there might be damage to people. It also means being critical so as not to fail to recognize differences and distinctions which have values that should not be transgressed.

#### A CRITICAL LOOK AT THE LAW OF GRADUALISM

There are two items from the *Relatio* that are quoted below to emphasize that underneath the search of the extraordinary assembly of bishops gathered in Rome last October, 2015 is its openness to the option of gradualism.

Likewise, those who are divorced and remarried require careful discernment and an accompaniment of great respect. Language or behavior that might make them feel an object of discrimination should be avoided, all the while encouraging them to participate in the life of the community. The Christian community's care of such persons is not to be considered a weakening of its faith and testimony to the indissolubility of marriage, but, precisely in this way, the community is seen to express its charity (No. 51).

*The synod fathers also considered the possibility of giving the divorced and remarried access to the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. Various synod fathers insisted on maintaining the present discipline, because*

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<sup>30</sup>Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 117.

*of the constitutive relationship between participation in the Eucharist and communion with the Church as well as her teaching on the indissoluble character of marriage. Others proposed a more individualized approach, permitting access in certain situations and with certain well-defined conditions, primarily in irreversible situations and those involving moral obligations towards children who would have to endure unjust suffering. Access to the sacraments might take place if preceded by a penitential practice, determined by the diocesan bishop. The subject needs to be thoroughly examined, bearing in mind the distinction between an objective sinful situation and extenuating circumstances, given that “imputability and responsibility for an action can be diminished or even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors” (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1735) (No. 52).*

*The relationship between the priest and the penitents, both in the internal and external fora, is dynamic and interactive. In many cases it is expressed not only as a spiritual counseling but also as a moral one. When the relationship assumes a moral form, it is transformed into a real and appropriate educational process through which persons are helped to mature and increase in the knowledge of moral values and the correct manner to realize them. In that situation, there comes the opportunity to confront the expected tension present in any process of education and which forms part of its essential configuration – the actual conditions in the process of giving education and the ends or goals of education. This is the real reason why we talk about education since it can only come about through foreseeing the phases and levels of maturation corresponding to the vital growth in education toward values.*



In the past, this process of education was well-known. However, it was not considered important in the moral field because of a particular presumption relative to the matter of age of reason. In other words, once a person would have reached the age of reason it was accepted that natural ethic would automatically follow. Thus, persons having reached the age of reason are already considered to have the capacity toward moral discretion or moral discernment. Moreover, there was the assertion that with this knowledge a child aged eight or nine could already understand substantially the difference between right and wrong similar to an adult. A good example of this kind of thinking is the confession of children.

Societies in the past lived out a united standard of moral approval. This means that in general they had a certain level of fundamental unity as regards moral principles and their general applications through its educational agencies, popular customs, literatures, etc. However, today, with insights from J. Piaget and L. Kohlberg regarding the evolution of moral judgment, we know that there is such a thing as cognitive-moral growth. The contributions offered by analytical studies on the conscious and subconscious have given light to that part of the moral life of the person that is conditioned and marked out by both their will and action.

The constitution of a society that is less unitary from the moral point of view has in fact brought about the complexity of moral formation (principles/values and applications) of individuals. This brings about general acceptability or acknowledgment of the processual or progressive character of moral maturation.

In a strictly Christian environment, this knowledge is greatly favored by biblical and patristic renewal, because at the heart of it is the emphasis on the importance of the pedagogical attitude of God in revelation – processual or progressive. Concretely, the instruction or teaching of God to Israel is to progress from polygamy to monogamy or from material respect of the covenant to the interior and spiritual respect for it; the teaching of Jesus

progresses from apostolic teaching to a teaching to the Christian communities. This pedagogical-processual attitude comes out clearly also in the writings of the Fathers of the Church.

Thus, while the Church magisterium considers theology as truly important, it nevertheless relates it to a pastoral reality, for example, the relationship of the individuals to the order of values regulating sexual and family life. This process is considered indispensable after the publication of *Humanae Vitae* and *Persona Humana*. It has functioned as a true and proper litmus test to bring about sociocultural transformations in the consciences of Christians. From there discussions arise regarding the principle or law of gradualism as a regulating orientation in the moral formation of individuals and couples relative to values in sexuality and family life and their coherent observance of them.

Both theology and the magisterium have brought into the open some elements to understand and live out better the law of gradualism. The Fifth Synod of Bishops on the Duties of the Christian Family in Today's World in 1980 speaks about this law of gradualism extensively. Within the wisdom of gradualism is a foresight toward a way to solve the problem of distance between the ideal and the real in moral behavior, particularly the sexual. The Synod made various propositions relative to this theme. In the *Instrumentum Laboris* no. 7 of the 1980 Synod, there is recognition of the need for a pastoral and educational guidance to the faithful and people in general. They must be led forward from what they already received from the mystery of Christ to a richer understanding of that mystery and to a fuller integration of it in their lives and customs. *Familiaris Consortio* nos. 9 and 33 take this insight in this manner:

*What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which, while requiring an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness, is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances*

*gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man. Therefore an educational growth process is necessary, in order that individual believers, families and peoples, even civilization itself, by beginning from what they have already received of the mystery of Christ, may patiently be led forward, arriving at a richer understanding and a fuller integration of this mystery in their lives (no. 9)*

*And so the Church never ceases to exhort and encourage all to resolve whatever conjugal difficulties may arise without ever falsifying or compromising the truth: she is convinced that there can be no true contradiction between the divine law on transmitting life and that on fostering authentic married love. Accordingly, the concrete pedagogy of the Church must always remain linked with her doctrine and never be separated from it (33).*

The “*Relatio Synodi*” of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “*Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization*” published officially in October 25, 2015 mentions in a different manner the need to guide families in the problems they confront. No 25 of the *Relatio* takes up the insight of *Evangelii Gaudium* in its opening further growth to those people who find themselves in difficult situations:

*At the same time, the Church is conscious of the weakness of many of her children who are struggling in their journey of faith. “Consequently, without detracting from the evangelical ideal, they need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur. [...] A small step in the midst of great human limitations can be more pleasing to God than a life which outwardly appears in order and passes the day without confronting*

*great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God's saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings.” (Evangelii Gaudium, 44).*

In the light of this openness, the same *Relatio* pursues the direction of gradualism in its Pastoral Challenges. In no. 11 of the Final Report we find this statement:

*In accordance with Christ's mercy, the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and lost love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm. Conscious that the most merciful thing is to tell the truth in love, we go beyond compassion. Merciful love, as it attracts and unites, transforms and elevates. It is an invitation to conversion. We understand the Lord's attitude in the same way; he does not condemn the adulterous woman, but asks her to sin no more (Jn 8:1-11)*

In pastoral care of the spouses, a priest should bear in mind the law of gradualism. It is one concrete teaching which must be coherent and never separated from the teaching of the Church. In following the law of gradualism neither the priests nor the couples must institute a false dichotomy between the doctrine and the pastoral practice, rather they must truly search for the way toward full and mature faith mindful of the patience that God has in searching for us.

John Paul II in his address during the closing of the 1980 Synod on the Family emphasizes clearly that it should be around the law of gradualism that a minister ought not to be shaky or misunderstanding:

*And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law,’ as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations (October 25, 1980 Homily).*

*Familiaris Consortio* no. 34 taking the words of John Paul II emphasizes strongly that the law is not gradual:

*They cannot however look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: they must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy...On the same lines, it is part of the Church’s pedagogy that husbands and wives should first of all recognize clearly the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* as indicating the norm for the exercise of their sexuality, and that they should endeavor to establish the conditions necessary for observing that norm.*

Taking into account the debates preceding and following *Familiaris Consortio* and those that followed some characteristic elements may be posed relative to the way the Church sees the law of gradualism:

1. The law of gradualism is based on the same structure of the human person, a subject who is progressively growing toward maturity in all the aspects of his/her existence – physical, affective, cognitive, relational, and all the other aspects of one’s personality – integrating all these components into a unity in a life guided by values.

Paul VI asked addressing the Notra Dame team who visited him:

*Who does not know? The human person can only reach the hierarchy of his multiple tendencies and integrate them...The journey of the spouses, like that of human life, knows many stages, painful and difficult...There they know where their place is...(nos. 14-15)*

This journey of the human person coincides fundamentally with his or her historicity, as explained by *Familiaris Consortio* no. 34: “But man, who has been called to live God’s wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth.”

Concretely, this means every successive step comes from the preceding one. One cannot jump or, at least, make very long one. The educator makes a step each time and if ever he jumps he does it by taking into account the possibility or the capacity of the person.

2. Secondly, the law is a gradualism towards being more or it is a journey that has a direction in meaning towards growing integration of the values into one’s own life and the conformity of one’s life to the values. The law of gradualism cannot be a sanction or simple ascertaining of the status quo.
3. This aspect of growing integration toward the higher content of the law of gradualism is also one to which *Familiaris Consortio* makes reference. We refer only to no. 9 of this papal document already cited earlier to affirm this.
4. In the third place, it is said that one’s motive toward the dynamics of growth in values is what constitutes the law of gradualism. This must not be confused with the ideal of the gradualism of the law.

To understand the difference, let us take polygamy as an example. For us Christians and those who believe in the equality of the dignity of man and woman,

marriage imposes a total and reciprocal self-giving between each other. This is the reason for monogamy. Polygamy is incompatible to Christian truth regarding marriage and the equal dignity of man and woman. Some have suggested that with the problems encountered in the work of evangelization in Africa, there is need to open up on polygamy in light of the practice of the new converts from polygamous societies. For them consent must be given to polygamy until they come to the maturity in their monogamous disposition. In other words, monogamy could be a moral law more elevated relative to marriage and polygamy is on a lower level. However, for one who is knowledgeable of the meaning of Christian marriage and the equality in dignity of man and woman, it is not a question of different levels of the law but rather contradiction of the law.

It is in this light that we can appreciate discourse of John Paul II in the closing the Synod on the Family in 1980:

*And so what is known as ‘the law of gradualness’ or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with ‘gradualness of the law,’ as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations. In God’s plan, all husbands and wives are called in marriage to holiness, and this lofty vocation is fulfilled to the extent that the human person is able to respond to God’s command with serene confidence in God’s grace and in his or her own will.”(no. 34).*

These elements are taken up in the *Vademecum for Confessors* nos. 3 section 9.

*The pastoral “law of gradualness,” not to be confused with the “gradualness of the law” which would tend to diminish the demands it places on us, consists of requiring a decisive break with sin together with a progressive path towards total union with the will of God and with his loving demands*

What does it say? Gradualism is probably not seen as a mechanical or geometric reality. It does not say that the truth is not there until one has all the means to realize it. Neither does it deal with casuistic equiprobabilism<sup>31</sup> to diminish or lessen the force or the normativity of the truth.

Truly, in this discourse on gradualism it is to be described as a spiritual attitude which has an anthropological grounding. This is because the human person is a being who is a becoming. Besides, theologically speaking, he or she finds his or her being in God and in his or her relationship with human history.

This attitude can be described better probably along this line of thinking. It is important to ascertain the utmost theological and spiritual importance of gradualism which unites in one word some complex terms given by data coming from faith. This describes to us the historical condition of reason and behavior of the human person, a historical condition that truly takes his or her dimension from the revelation of the economy of salvation but is already inscribed in biological determination in which a sign is already imprinted in birth, growth, and death. This is not less inscribed in a social situation measured by duration or rendered fruitful only in the culture and temporal customs. Gradualism also contains many other meanings, particularly one of itinerary. That

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<sup>31</sup>It was St. Alphonsus de Liguori, the founder of the Redemptorist Congregation who introduced this principle in moral theology. *Equiprobabilism* refers to a system of principles designed to guide the conscience of one in doubt whether he is free from or bound by a given civil or religious law.



is the itinerary that God wants his people to follow and which the Scripture describes. It is the itinerary of the disciples who follow Christ; lastly, it is the itinerary of collective and individual growth in perseverance through fidelity to the gift of grace.

Thus gradualism is suggested to be intrinsically connected to the human condition, his or her historicity, where God has indicated his closeness to the historical person, shown in terms of an itinerary or as an itinerant logic of grace.

Ultimately, gradualism measures up the person's capacity to express his or her love of God and neighbor in the here and now with all the resources and the limitations he or she has. Reaching the goal of perfection in love is indeed a step by step journey.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen the different aspects of an understanding of the principle of gradualism. Starting from the mandate to provide moral education in the actual task of pastorally guiding people plagued by moral dilemmas, we moved into the introduction of the principle of gradualism. This principle zeroes in on the step by step accompaniment for those who seek direction in their desire to live out the ideal of the love of God and neighbor given the constrictions of their context or situation.

Last year's 14<sup>th</sup> Synod of Bishops on the Family (October 4-25, 2015) seriously considered the principle, particularly in addressing the dilemmas confronted by those couples who live in irregular unions. The insights of *Familiaris Consortio* on the principle helped a lot in showing the possibility of employing this principle in pastoral moral guidance for those who find themselves in moral dilemmas. Specifically, the Synod had in mind the assistance via the principle to be given those who find themselves in irregular situations vis-à-vis their marriage.

If the internal forum or the contemporary pastoral moral guidance provides the occasion for a deeper understanding of the situation facing those with moral dilemmas, the principle of gradualism gives the possibility of slowly moving into the ideal demanded by faith. In discerning the action of God in the life of a person who can only respond up to a point to the love of Him and the neighbors, the principle serves as strong ground to stand on in one's journey to a life of perfection to which men and women of goodwill are called upon to realize. This means concretely the alignment of the capacity of persons at each stage of their history of personal development with the universal value or law that is concerned with the good of the human person in general. The law of gradualness directs itself toward a growing alignment of the particular with the universal focus.

If there is discrepancy between the universal and particular focus there would be the presence of what contemporary moral theologians would call "non-moral evil" or "ontic evil." That is their way of recognizing that there is something unsatisfactory as long as both the universal and particular foci are not aligned. However, they would insist that the law of gradualness must not be restricted to the subjective field of inner personal development. The personal sphere cannot be divorced from its social context. If this happens, then the law of gradualness will be abused in the sense that all the creative tension between the personal sphere and the social context would be taken out of the human situation by saying that each situation is literally independent and has its own law. This posture will be equivalent to extreme situation ethics which was already condemned in the past in Catholic moral theology.

In the situation of many couples living in irregular union, the law of gradualness is a way of saying that people can only start from where they are. That is where their decisions have to be made. Where they are, meaning, their present stage of development embraces the emotional, psychological, intellectual, moral, volitional, affective, spiritual, etc., levels of their being. In

this regard, they must not make any decision that is totally beyond their current capacities to realize. If ever, it must be a decision which is made according to their capacity. Inevitably, part of starting from where people are will entail starting from their present interpersonal and social institutions.

Ultimately, in any attempt to apply the principle of gradualism to those who find themselves in irregular unions, the overriding consideration is pastoral charity, the love and concern for the other who is unable to find yet the light and authentic disposition to fulfill the law perfectly, that is, the love God and neighbor. In other words, considering the principle of gradualism in the divine salvific plan, one asks what possibilities are given to married couples who experience the failure of their marriage, or rather how it is possible to offer them Christ's help through the ministry of the Church. In this respect, a significant hermeneutical key comes from the teaching of Vatican Council II, which, while it affirms that "although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure...these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity" (Lumen Gentium, 8). In the light of this insight, we can ultimately say that the principle of gradualism is the creative process of determining our belonging to God and the Church.

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