

Resistances to *Amoris Laetitia*: A Critical Approach

Antonio Autiero

WHEN POPE FRANCIS PROMULGATED THE apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* on March 19, 2016, a thrill of exultation went through many people, both within and outside the church. The work of the two Synods on the family and the hopes of renewal which had animated the synodal dynamic came together in the papal document. However, not only positive feelings and new certainties emerged. Doubts, questions, and ciphers for opposing positions found expression. These reactions of a different tenor mirrored the discussions during the two sessions of the Synod on the family.¹ Nothing would be as it had been; a turning point had been reached, and a new page in the ecclesial consciousness had been opened—a page not to be turned back.

The picture has not changed in the intervening years. *Amoris Laetitia* elicits both sincere adherence and cautious reactions, broadens the horizon both of theological culture and of pastoral praxis, but also continues to evoke resistances of varying intensity and significance.

* This paper was presented at the 44th Brazilian Congress of Moral Theology in September 2021. The conference was dedicated to Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, on the fifth anniversary of its publication. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, this conference was held online.

¹ The letter of the four cardinals (Brandmüller, Burke, Caffarra, and Meisner) to Pope Francis, dated September 19, 2016, is well known. They set out four questions on points in *Amoris Laetitia* they saw as a source of confusion: "Letter from Four Cardinals to the Holy Father: The Full Text and the Dubia," *Tiscali News*, November 16, 2016, notizie.tiscali.it/esteri/articoli/divorziati-4-cardinali-contro-papa-lettera-testo/. For a thorough study of its contents, see Antonio Autiero and Stephan Goertz, "A proposito di dubbi, errori, e distinzioni. Una postfazione," in Stephan Goertz and Caroline Witting, eds., Italian ed. by Antonio Autiero, *Amoris Laetitia. Un punto di svolta per la teologia morale?* (San Paolo: Cisinello Balsamo, 2017), 257–69. For a broader picture of the critical positions, see Robert Dodaro, ed., *Permanere nella verità di Cristo: Matrimonio e comunione nella Chiesa cattolica* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2015), with contributions by five cardinals of the Catholic Church (Brandmüller, Müller, Caffara, De Paolis, and Burke) and four other scholars (Mankowski, Rist, Vasil', and the editor); Livio Melina, ed., *Conversione pastorale per la famiglia: sì, ma quale? Contributo del Pontificio Istituto Giovanni Paolo II al Sinodo* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2015).

To study this panorama of “yes’s,” “no’s,” and “perhaps’s”—with particular attention to the resistances—is a task we take up here, after offering some preliminary remarks.

First, we restrict the field of our reflections. The resistances or negative reactions to *Amoris Laetitia* may be practical or theoretical. The first type refers to a scanty consideration of the papal document and the entire synodal process for the initiation and development of new pastoral praxis in the local churches. In a recent, well-documented article on the reception of *Amoris Laetitia*,² James Keenan, SJ, draws our attention to the vocabulary that the document employs, which can and ought to be the basis for a renewed theological-pastoral approach to marriage and the family. He also supplies highly relevant information about the situation in many dioceses. He investigates, by way of paradigm, dioceses in the USA, in which both the bishops and diocesan structures have displayed resistance toward *Amoris Laetitia*, mostly in terms of indifference and lack of attention. This type of practical resistance erodes *Amoris Laetitia* in its foundations and threatens to reduce it to irrelevance. While this kind of attitude ought to be investigated, in order better to grasp its implications and extent, it is not explicitly at the center of my reflections here. I wish rather to look at the “theoretical” resistance.

Second, examining the resistance to *Amoris Laetitia* can have various goals and be carried out with a variety of intentions and styles. One can be swept away by a *vis polemica* that seeks to obey an apologetic impetus from the papal document and regards the emerging resistances as easily recognizable, thanks to their level of incompetence or incompleteness. One could thus easily be led to distance oneself from them in the name of a perfunctory judgment that automatically sees what is new as best. Such an ideological position impairs our understanding of the meaning of the questions involved. I shall endeavor here to escape this ideological perspective and polemical intention to approach the question of the resistance to *Amoris Laetitia* in dialogue with both the visible and hidden levels on which the arguments play out. In this regard, tackling the question of the resistances with heuristic and hermeneutic sensitivity allows us to see a much more composite picture that does justice to the complex character of the questions. This circular critical attitude and its results depend on the capacity for self-criticism. Looking at the resistances also means looking at the potential contained in *Amoris Laetitia* that demands further development. This study can serve to display *Amoris Laetitia*’s vitality and demonstrate its generative energy for a new framework of theological thinking and ecclesial praxis.

² James Keenan, “Regarding *Amoris Laetitia*: Its Language, Its Reception, Some Challenges, and Agnosticism of Some of the Hierarchy,” in *Perspectiva Teológica Belo Horizonte* 53, no. 1 (2021): 41–60.

DOCTRINE AND TRUTH

A recurrent sign can be noted at the beginning of every new pontificate, namely, the will to renew the life of the church. With John XXIII, it was a matter of “aggiornamento,” of which Vatican II was only the dawn; with Paul VI, it was the will to confront in a spirit of dialogue the challenge of the modern world in its progress; with John Paul II, it involved beating the new path of the human being as “the path of the church.” All these inspirations show the irrepressible newness of the Gospel, which demands landslides and reshuffles, renewal and new beginnings. While all this certainly generates new inspirations, awakens new adherences, and kindles enthusiasms that otherwise would have slumbered, it nevertheless brings us back to the question of the protection of the doctrines connected to the faith, and to the safekeeping of the truth, as something absolutely essential, if we are to be faithful to the Gospel.

It is against this background that we must understand the beginning of Francis’s pontificate and his decision to convoke a Synod on the family, first in an extraordinary and then in an ordinary session, preceded by a wide movement of consultation of the community of believers with regard to their experience, with an eye to the times that lay ahead. This already disturbs anyone who has a functional and limited understanding of the value of life-experience and does not recognize the genetic value of the experience on which a person reflects as a significant factor in the elaboration of practical truths linked to the sphere of morality. The synodal event and the apostolic exhortation connected to it expressed a change of route in the genesis of moral consciousness in relation to marriage and the family. There is a will to listen to people’s experience and accompany them on the way; there is a will to draw near the fragility of the family’s existence and affective relationships, not primarily with a codex of truth to be defended or with norms to be imposed but with the awareness of the need to put questions to these practical truths in order to grasp their basis, comprehend their content, and verify their effectiveness. The turning point for the genesis of the ethical visions proposed in today’s world is irritating and upsetting (I use the word in a rather negative sense) for those not acquainted with an inductive approach to practical knowledge and who consider this approach inadequate. The deductive habit, on which the tradition of Catholic moral theology is largely based, was put to a hard test by this conspicuous change of pace.

In the years prior to *Amoris Laetitia*, there was certainly no lack of elements calling into question the traditional solutions to moral problems, including especially problems linked to the sphere of sexuality and the family. The prevalence of the deductive approach, reinforced by its anchoring in an anthropological vision with a clear metaphysical foundation and only scant consideration of the scientific knowledge

produced by the biological sciences,³ had however maintained the scheme of reference basically unaltered. The decades of the moral magisterium of John Paul II are emblematic in this regard. They signal a consolidation of the main axis of a deductive moral theology and the primacy of truth. The most striking expression of this consolidation is the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (VS).⁴ The Synod and *Amoris Laetitia*, thanks to their will to take an incarnate look at the real conditions under which conjugal relationships and the family exist, dislodged what had been regarded as already clarified and defined once and for all by the moral teaching of the preceding decades. This overturning brought forth a new language. Above all, the relationship between doctrine and praxis, truth and freedom was balanced differently.

The resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* on this front are considerable. Although expressed in different ways, these resistances all form branches of one and the same vine, namely, the value of doctrine for church life. The latter does not immediately involve dogmatic levels of doctrine, but in some respects, we are not very far from these. *Amoris Laetitia* does not deconstruct the system of doctrine about marriage and the family; indeed, it solidifies the meaning and value of this doctrine on the basis of reading Scripture and recalling the Gospel of love. *Amoris Laetitia* does not take the easy turn of a superficial shortcut of a generically pastoral kind, discounting truth and invoking merciful understanding of difficult situations. What *Amoris Laetitia* does is to allow the call of the Gospel to the authenticity of life and relationships to live in creative osmosis with the *conditio humana* that the same Gospel addresses. One who laments that *Amoris Laetitia* distorts doctrine in favor of *de facto* adaptations of a pastoral type bases his argument on a dichotomy between doctrine and praxis where the primacy of the former determines the subordination of the latter. Critics of *Amoris Laetitia* stylize the relationship between orthodoxy and orthopraxis in an emphatic manner, thus producing an altered dialectic that is not circular and dynamic but linear and descending from the second term to the first.

Something more is at stake—something that those who express their resistance to *Amoris Laetitia* fail to see with adequate clarity,

³ For a good historical reconstruction of a sexual moral theology of this kind, see the recent book by Eberhard Schockenhoff, *Die Kunst zu lieben. Unterwegs zu einer neuen Sexualethik* (Freiburg: Herder, 2021).

⁴ See Magnus Striet, “Johannes Paul II. und das Ende einer Lehramtsepoche,” in Stephan Goertz and Magnus Striet, eds., *Johannes Paul II.—Vermächtnis und Hypothek eines Pontifikats* (Freiburg: Herder, 2020), 61–84. The reference to *Veritatis Splendor* occupies an important place in the *dubia* of the four cardinals, posing the problem of the continuity or discontinuity between *Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia*. On this, see Angel Pere-Lopez, “*Veritatis Splendor* and *Amoris Laetitia*: Neither Lamented nor Celebrated Discontinuity,” *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 4 (2018): 1183–214.

something that takes their argument back into a closed vision. They ignore the fact that the very idea of doctrine has been undergoing a striking evolution for some time now. In the mid-1980s, the American theologian George A. Lindbeck gave rise to a broad debate with his book *The Nature of Doctrine*.⁵ He sees a threefold ideal-typical model for the understanding of the concept of doctrine. The first is the cognitive-propositional model widespread in the Western rationalist tradition. The focus is placed on propositional utterances that function as transporters of doctrinal truths. These are perceived and organized in a system of knowledge and belief to be received and transmitted, thus creating the nucleus of tradition binding for the present and the future. The static character of this model is obvious. It is moderated and overcome in the second model, which Lindbeck calls experiential-expressive, close to the liberal theology of the post-Enlightenment epoch and harmonizing well with the theological approaches of writers such as Paul Tillich, Karl Rahner, and Bernard Lonergan. A renewed attention to the subject and his or her history led to an attempt to bind together truths to be believed, doctrinal pronouncements, and expressions of an existence open to salvation. Even in this model, however, the links that can explain permanence and change in the doctrinal structure of religious knowledge remain to some extent unresolved. This is why Lindbeck proposes, in an attempt at a synthesis, a third model he calls cultural-linguistic and sees as “equipped to account more fully than can the first two types for both variable and invariable aspects of the religious traditions.”⁶ The horizon of understanding of this cultural-linguistic model of understanding the nature of doctrine draws on references to other branches of knowledge (anthropology, philosophy, and sociology)⁷ and regards the system of what we define as culture and language as the paradigmatic structure for understanding the doctrine of religious traditions. A doctrine of this kind,

Like a culture or a language ... is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of the individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of those subjectivities. It comprises a vocabulary of discursive and non-discursive symbols together with a distinctive logic or grammar in terms of which this vocabulary can be meaningfully deployed. Lastly, just as a language (or “language game,” to use

⁵ George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (London: SPCK, 1984).

⁶ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 17.

⁷ Sociology draws our attention to the intertwining of persistence and change as a necessary pendulum swing; we cannot think of one without the other (and vice versa). See Orlando Patterson, “The Mechanisms of Cultural Reproduction: Explaining the Puzzle of Persistence,” in Laura Grindstaff, Miriam Ming-Cheng Lo, and John R. Hall, eds., *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2020), 122–32.

Wittgenstein's phrase) is correlated with a form of life, and just as a culture has both cognitive and behavioral dimensions, so it is also in the case of a religious tradition.⁸

The reference to Lindbeck, quite apart from the provocative value of his approach,⁹ functions as a hermeneutical instrument to grasp the tensions that critics of *Amoris Laetitia* emphasize. They see the doctrine in a kind of immutability and change as a betrayal of the doctrine. This tension, however, is a definitive impoverishment of the doctrine itself. The systematic theologian Michael Seewald, whose thinking is close to that of Walter Kasper, places an accent precisely on the relationship between Gospel and dogma, in order to assert the dynamic nature of doctrinal propositions as historical expressions of the Gospel: "The dogma is therefore a means in view of an end, not an end in itself. As a means, it is absolutely necessary, but at the same time, it must ask whether, as times change, it is capable of corresponding to its own proper end, that is to say, to the exposition of the Gospel in propositional form."¹⁰ Doctrinal formulations express the richness of the Gospel, but never contain it in an exhaustive manner. They constitute a second-order level of truths, what we might call (with Lindbeck) a grammar of the rules of expression, while first-order truths place the emphasis on the "performatory conformity of the self to God."¹¹

Amoris Laetitia restores an equilibrium that recognizes the primacy of the Gospel vis-à-vis the expressions of doctrine and rules. The tradition had understood and preserved these, but they must continuously be rethought in light of the Gospel. In this sense, *Amoris Laetitia* does not downgrade doctrine, but gives it validity; it does not subject it to the "dictatorship of relativism" denounced but frees it from the temptation of stagnation. Doctrine is an open word generated by the Gospel for the human being of today, while at the same time being prompted continuously to give an account of its closeness to the Gospel in the time that lies ahead.

⁸ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 33.

⁹ See D. F. Ford, "The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age by George A. Lindbeck," *Journal of Theological Studies* 37, no. 1 (1986): 277–82. For a careful presentation of the genesis and significance of Lindbeck's thought, see Hans-Joachim Tambour, *Theologischer Pragmatismus. Semiotische Überlegungen zu George A. Lindbecks kulturell-sprachlichem Ansatz* (Münster: LIT, 2002).

¹⁰ Michael Seewald, *Il dogma in divenire. Equilibrio dinamico di continuità e discontinuità* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2002), 12.

¹¹ Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 66.

GREATNESS AND FRAGILITY OF LOVE

The tensions that have come to light in the reactions to *Amoris Laetitia*—including accusations of heresy¹²—regarding the mutability or immutability of doctrine are closely linked to a second theme. This theme mostly moves in the direction of the anthropological-moral sphere and encompasses a broad spectrum from basic affirmations to concrete implications. The church's attention to marriage and the family is not new. Its teaching in this area has been constant and incisive.¹³ *Amoris Laetitia* takes a critical look at two signals accompanying the understanding of marriage and the family, consolidated in the tradition,¹⁴ with the intention of renewing them.

The first factor we must mention is that the tradition has for a long time given priority to an institutional-juridical understanding of marriage and the family. In the interplay between civil and canon law, the foundational act and conjugal conduct have been regulated by the juridical framework. The form of marriage and its connection with the reality of the sacrament, as well as the duties of the spouses in relation to the ends of the conjugal bond, have long been seen from the juridical perspective, where the consideration of the subjects involved has not been particularly relevant. Up to the turning point reached with *Gaudium et Spes*, the primacy of the juridical over the anthropological certainly is the determining sign of the traditional vision that influenced the conjugal institution. The endeavors generated by the complex process of the definition and recognition of marriage as a sacrament—despite all the possible sources of meaning (from the nuptial symbolism in the Bible to the semantics of the theology of the sacraments and the elaboration of a conjugal spirituality)—have not succeeded in shifting attention to the subjects of the conjugal relationship. They have basically retained, without any change, the primacy of marriage as a juridical institution. One epiphenomenon of this picture is the way in which the woman, in markedly patriarchal cultures, enters into the conjugal dynamic and lives its various modulations. The predominant goal connected to the institution of the family, namely that of “multiplying” (we recall here the image of “the family as the basic cell of society”), has also conditioned the perception of the woman,

¹² See *Correctio filialis de haeresibus propagatis*, July 16, 2017, www.correctiofilialis.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/Correctio-filialis_English_1.pdf.

¹³ This is well documented in Pontificio Consiglio per la Famiglia, ed., *Enchiridion della famiglia e della vita. Documenti magisteriali e pastorali dal Concilio di Firenze (1439) a Papa Francesco* (Rome: Libreria Vaticana, 2014); Gilfredo Marengo, *Generare nell'amore. La missione della famiglia cristiana nell'insegnamento ecclesiale dal Vaticano II a oggi* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2014).

¹⁴ I have sketched this in Antonio Autiero, “Rapporti, legami, famiglie. Forme di vita in transizione,” in Gianni Picenardi, ed., *Persona, psiche e società. Sulle tracce dell'uomo. Atti del XVI corso dei Simposi rosminiani 24–27 agosto 2015* (Stressa: Edizioni Rosminiane, 2016), 45–64.

wife, and mother, as natural *locus* of the generative process and of the educational task. This has also led to ascribing to the man the characteristics of guide and guardian of the family, which have not always been kept separate from deviations such as domination and the desire to possess the other. These functions and roles have taken precedence over the identities of persons and their relationships.

For those who see in *Amoris Laetitia* the attempt to bypass this order of things, resistance is not a secondary matter. Nor is it incomprehensible. Interpreted in its rarefied and abstract quality, the juridical-institutional order produced an ideal picture of marriage and the family. The loss of this picture is seen as the effect of a shift towards the universe of the persons and their relationships, itself perceived as a deviation for which *Amoris Laetitia* bears responsibility. One must ask whether such a resistance is not paying a disproportionate debt to the presumed guarantees of the stability of the institution of marriage promised by the law—with the result that one demeans the anthropological values of the life-project of persons and the concrete decisions they take in order to make this project possible. One must ask whether the resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* on this point are not in fact signals of the erosion of trust in the ability of persons to take on responsibility with regard to their own life-projects in a relationship. One who has recourse to the certainty of law, understanding this not only as positive law but above all as natural law, is reducing the reality of the love between persons to the law and exposing marriage and the family to the rhetoric of a stability that encounters not life itself, but merely the regulatory structures of legal systems. For *Amoris Laetitia*, what is involved rather is a journey of the incarnation of conjugal experience that, while not ignoring juridical instances, passes them through the crucible of the anthropological values expressed via the intentions, will, and responsibility of persons. The primacy of love, strongly confirmed in *Amoris Laetitia*, maintains the observance of the juridical system but accompanies this with the interior spring of the life choices taken by persons able to open themselves to the *de facto* and challenging horizon of love.

A second factor is the strong accent on the natural-law dimension of the traditional way of looking at marriage. This factor led to an ever-stronger emphasis, of an ontological type, on the being of the person, with the result that marriage and the family were seen in an idealized manner. A moral theology of marriage constructed around this kind of ontological backbone is not able to draw near the existential conditions and lived histories of individuals and their relationships. *Amoris Laetitia* takes a very different line. Its structure manifests all the richness of the ideals inspired by the Creator's plan and the salvific grace of the sacrament, while at the same time taking account of the life stories in which the conjugal relationships unfold. Reading people's lives and taking seriously the concrete experiences of what happens in marriage

turns out to be a powerful source of understanding of the family and the affective relationships that take place in it. *Amoris Laetitia* looks at the *de facto* condition of family life with an eye that is disenchanting but not resigned, while paying critical attention to those factors that have acquired their own specific weight in contemporary culture, such as gender sensitivity and the dynamic understanding of the construction of identities and roles.¹⁵ This promotes an awareness of the centrality of persons rather than institutions and the concreteness of experience rather than the abstraction of an idealized frame of reference. *Amoris Laetitia* makes a good attempt at understanding marriage and the family in a more calibrated equilibrium between nature and culture, ontology and history, and ideals and the lived life.

The resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* are also due to this difficult metabolization of the change of pace and paradigm. The assumption of the category of fragility, so central to *Amoris Laetitia*, irritates those who prefer to deduce from the idea of human nature an idealized and abstract picture of marriage and the family and consider the failures that may occur as either a hostile fate to be resisted or a moral disorder to repent for. The vocabulary of mercy, gesture of welcome, care for the fragility of love—is perceived by those who resist the novelty of *Amoris Laetitia* as a loss of the ontological consistency of the conjugal bond and a misplacement of the moral sense in favor of a comprehension making unjustifiable concessions.

CONSCIENCE AND MORAL ACTS

From the two factors indicated above follow at least two consequences. Their function is to make explicit the reference to topics that always emerge when resistance to *Amoris Laetitia* finds expression. The first consequence is recurrent reference to *Veritatis Splendor* in the critical reflection on *Amoris Laetitia*, especially with a view to reinforcing a correct idea of moral conscience that—it is alleged—*Amoris Laetitia* has blatantly altered. In particular, there is a repeated refusal to accept what *Veritatis Splendor* no. 54 calls “a ‘creative’ understanding of the moral conscience,” seen as a contrast to the correct teaching of the tradition. To distance oneself from creative conscience would mean affirming that conscience has the character of the executive organ of morality, whose substance is decided on the basis of the

¹⁵ The very brief but rather severe verdict of *Amoris Laetitia* on “the various forms of an ideology of gender” (56) is well known. This has led to criticisms of *Amoris Laetitia* from other quarters, such as the IG Feministische Theologinnen, “Kein Grund zur Freude: Das päpstliche Schreiben ‘Amoris Laetitia,’” April 15, 2016, feministische-theologinnen.ch/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/IG_Stellungnahme_AmorisLaetitia.pdf. However, this verdict must be understood in the context of the approach of *Amoris Laetitia* to the condition of the person as a sexed being. On the positive values and critical aspects of this approach, see Lisa Sowle Cahill, “*Amoris Laetitia*: A New Approach to Sex and Gender Ethics,” *Asian Horizons* 12, no. 2 (2018): 296–314.

nature of the acts themselves. The knot is resolved in an antithesis positing as alternatives the objective level of morality established on the basis of the acts carried out and the subjective level affirming the primacy of the person and his or her moral substance, expressed in intentionality and responsibility for the choice of the right actions in relation to the concrete situation in which the subject is called to act.

Conscience and acts are two corresponding sides of one and the same dynamic of moral action: the quality of the acting person as subject and the concrete result of the actions the subject carries out. The objective tenor of moral judgment, which proceeds via the deontological line of the foundation of norms, makes the actions independent of the world of the subject, definitively isolates these actions and crystallizes them in a closed consideration of their very nature, finalities, and modalities. The sign of their moral value would be inscribed upon such actions *per se*, and the subject would be obliged to comply with this value via the applicative *locus* that is his or her conscience. *Veritatis Splendor* considers this path of foundation of moral norms to be the only path, in fidelity to the church's tradition, that can guarantee the moral order.¹⁶

Amoris Laetitia's position on conscience and moral acts surprises its critics, who immediately denounce its breach with the tradition—by which they explicitly mean *Veritatis Splendor*.¹⁷ Such critics find little relevance in the hermeneutical horizon in which *Amoris Laetitia* is located, which makes conscience the gravitational center of the subject's encounter with God, as no. 16 of *Gaudium et Spes* reminds us. This is where the moral dimension is verified: the subject is not the judge of morality, in the (scarcely critical) sense of a badly understood autonomy; moral authority rather is constituted in the dialogical relationship with God who summons him or her to the good. From this fontal point of the moral character of the subject flow the actions that he or she carries out, actions having a moral dimension because they are the expression of the moral substance of the subject and, in a definitive manner, of his or her relationship to God.¹⁸

¹⁶ In this respect, *Veritatis Splendor* takes up and enshrines a line of thinking in moral theology presented by authors such as John Finnis and Germain Grisez in the preceding decades. Their positions are well analyzed by Wolfgang Mommsen, *Christliche Ethik und Teleologie. Eine Untersuchung der ethischen Normierungstheorien von Germain Grisez, John Finnis und Alan Donagan* (Altenberge: Oros, 1993).

¹⁷ See Nadia Delicata, "Amoris Laetitia and Veritatis Splendor on the Object of the Act," *Melita Theologica* 67 (2017): 237–65.

¹⁸ See Delicata, "Amoris Laetitia and Veritatis Splendor," 241–42: "Questions surrounding the meaning of the object of the act are not merely a matter of philosophical preference, but ultimately, as *Amoris Laetitia* shows, of evangelical truth and therefore of the authenticity of the church herself as witnessed in her pastoral practice. But this attestation is true only insofar as we also understand what, in our contemporary cultural context, is at stake for the evangelizing mission of the church."

The non-atomization (and autonomization) of moral acts and the refusal to disconnect them from the source of the subject who carries them out provide a new and different perspective on the question of intrinsically evil actions. This last node has been taken up with vehemence in order to intensify the hostility toward *Amoris Laetitia*, which allegedly employed approaches neither univocal nor resolute to the question of the *intrinsice malum*. Critics of *Amoris Laetitia* (and of no. 304 in particular) have made no effort to understand the horizon of meaning of the apostolic exhortation, nor to contextualize the teaching of *Veritatis Splendor* (no. 79) against the background of the elaboration of this set of problems, which has seen considerable developments in recent years, especially in the attempt to bring together the world of the subject and weight of his or her actions.¹⁹

FROM JUDGING TO CARING

The second consequence is linked to the nature and importance of the experience of the couple. In more restrictive terms, one could speak here of the weight of circumstances in the definition of the moral quality of the state of marriage. One who looks at the circumstances from the perspective of a moral theology subordinate to the primacy of the juridical dimension considers them as a sort of accidental periphery, coordinates with a marginal character forming a framework for the moral action that do not touch its substance. However, the history of moral theology from the Middle Ages onwards clearly attests the consolidation of a much broader awareness.²⁰ Circumstances are a substantial factor that speaks the language of the context because they express the historical condition of the subject and the incarnate character of his or her moral choices. From this perspective, experience takes on a value that far exceeds strict conformity to an already defined juridical-ethical order, a value that demands to be recognized in the uniqueness characterizing life stories and their moral tensions.

The resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* with regard to “irregular situations” belong to the dynamics of this intersection between theory and praxis. The starting point is the emphatic way of defining these concrete expressions of life (the term “situations” has negative connotations) as inconsistent with the given rule (“irregular,” in fact). They then insist on a verdict of conformity, whose inexistence leaves no room for more flexible considerations. This reflects the rigid canon of an irremediably negative evaluation. In the decisive paragraph no.

¹⁹ See Nenad Polgar and Joseph A. Selling, eds., *The Concept of Intrinsic Evil and Catholic Theological Ethics* (London: Lexington, 2019), with interesting historical reconstructions and semantic developments of this category which, unfortunately, *Veritatis Splendor* presents in a static manner.

²⁰ The voluminous study by Johannes Gründel, *Die Lehre von den Umständen der menschlichen Handlung im Mittelalter* (Münster: Aschendorff, 1963) is a classic work on this matter.

305, *Amoris Laetitia* tackles this complex nexus in a different way. It attributes a different weight to circumstances in recognition of the value of people's life stories.²¹ This also shows the importance—by no means rhetorical or merely cosmetic—of an attitude that cares for the life stories of persons and their relationships.

The transition from the tribunal of judgment to the will to exercise care draws attention to the substantial image of accompaniment typical of *Amoris Laetitia* unfortunately ignored or denigrated by those who barricade themselves in utter rigidity behind positions of resistance. The implications on the value level of conjugal conditions that take shape after a first breakdown have a significance and substance so broad that they can be recognized as “signs of love which in some way reflect God's own love” (*Amoris Laetitia*, no. 294) without depriving them of the intimacy and closeness that find expression in the sphere of sexuality. If *Amoris Laetitia* thus overcomes the rigid way of looking at things in no. 84 of *Familiaris Consortio* (living together like brother and sister!), this is done precisely on the basis of a paradigmatic structure with a more balanced and constructive anthropology. The failure to recognize this ultimately means neglecting the historical dimension of persons and their life choices; it means absolutizing the objective truth of moral acts while ignoring the “*veritas vitae*”²² in which conscience and history, subject and acts encounter and balance each other. In this truth of or for life, the pastoral dimension of moral theology, as intended and demanded by *Amoris Laetitia*, finds its definitive expression.²³

CONCLUSION

Our critical examination of the resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* has shown that, apart from the substance of the individual questions that come to light in the criticism of the apostolic exhortation, the understanding of the typological approach and hermeneutical structure to which they refer is highly relevant. With this as our starting point, we can derive points of reflection that help us keep our attention on the

²¹ The recognition of levels of authenticity in the quality of relationships built up after the breakdown of an earlier matrimonial bond paves the way to forms of welcoming and accompanying that can also involve access to the sacraments, as *Amoris Laetitia* n. 351 suggests.

²² This expression goes back to Pope Adrian VI. See Rudolf Hein, “Gewissen im Spannungsfeld von Autonomie und Wahrheit. Denkanstöße durch das Konzept der *veritas vitae* bei Adrian von Utrecht,” *Studia Moralia* 55, no. 2 (2017): 243–69.

²³ On the meaning and substance of this pastoral dimension, see Ronaldo Zaccharias, “Amoritas laetitia: um sim radical à pastoralidade da teologia moral,” *Perspectiva Teológica Belo Horizonte* 53, no. 1 (2021): 17–39. On the relationship between pastoral and moral theology, see Antonio Autiero, “Amoris laetitia tra teologia pastorale e teologia morale,” in Antonio Autiero, ed., *Per una nuova cultura pastorale. Il contributo di Amoris Laetitia* (Milan: San Paolo, 2019), 23–39.

topic of the family and affective relationships, to comprehend the development of the models, and accommodate their fragilities.

Faithfulness to the tradition is not simply the gesture of repeating its provenance. Faithfulness to the tradition also involves a creative approach to a vision always open to new perspectives. This generates a sensitivity that, in epistemological terms, retrieves the historical-cultural context of the way in which doctrines were and continue to be formed. The investigation of this historical-cultural context liberates it from rigid visions and entrusts it to the creativity that provides inspiration for the future.²⁴

Forgetfulness of this doctrinal dynamic accentuates the tendency of doctrines to stagnate. Even more seriously, it relies on a “locking device” that ultimately reduces the space of vitality and action of the Spirit.²⁵ Those who defend the truth of doctrines very frequently do so through an exclusive and binding reference to teachings of the magisterium, understood in a strict sense. What Karl Rahner called *Lehrautorität der Gläubigen*, “the teaching authority of the faithful,” counts for little in their eyes.²⁶ In this dismissal, they neglect the *sensus fidelium* and thus its indispensable importance for practical truths and moral theology.²⁷

The resistances to *Amoris Laetitia* are definitely the product of disturbing deficits in the realms of anthropology, theology, and ecclesiology. When we look carefully at these deficits, it helps not only to grasp better the significance of these resistances but also to take up a (self-)critical spirit and see the important points. *Amoris Laetitia* must be received not as a self-contained document but as one element in a process open to marriage and the family as realities in movement. And this takes place against the constructive background of a passion for

²⁴ Pope Francis spoke some very incisive words on this subject at the General Audience of June 23, 2021, press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2021/06/23/0404/00886.html, commenting on the Letter to the Galatians: “There is no lack even today, in fact, of preachers ... who take their places not primarily in order to announce the Gospel of the God who loves human beings in Jesus, crucified and risen, but in order to repeat insistently, as true and genuine ‘guardians of the truth’—that is what they call themselves—what is the best way to be Christians. And they declare in strong words that this is what true Christianity is ... often identified with particular forms of the past. ... Even today ... there is the temptation to shut oneself up in some certainties acquired in past traditions ... One of the traces of this way of proceeding is rigidity. ... What the apostle points to is the liberating and ever new path of Jesus crucified and risen; it is the path of the proclamation that is realized through humility and fraternity ... And this gentle and obedient path goes ahead in the certainty that the Holy Spirit operates in every epoch of the Church.”

²⁵ I refer here to the reflections by Andrea Grillo, *Da museo a giardino. La tradizione della Chiesa oltre il “dispositivo di blocco”* (Assisi: Cittadella, 2019).

²⁶ Karl Rahner, “Zum Verhältnis von Theologie und Volksreligion,” in *Schriften zur Theologie*, vol. 16 (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1984), 185–95.

²⁷ See Charles Curran and Lisa Fullam, eds., *The Sensus Fidelium and Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist, 2017).

human beings and their relational capacities in service to a church faithful to the newness of the Gospel. **M**

Antonio Autiero (born in Naples, Italy, 1948) received his doctoral degree in moral theology at the Accademia Alfonsiana in Rome and in philosophy at the University of Naples. In 1991, he became professor of moral theology at the University of Münster (Germany), where he taught until his retirement in 2013. Antonio Autiero has authored or edited books and articles on fundamental moral theology and applied ethics. He is a member of the Stem Cell Research governmental commission in Berlin and the Planning Committee of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC).