

The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*

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Abstract

Pope Francis's apostolic exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* recast pastoral decisions in terms of conscience and discernment and asked moral theology to do the same. Such a request invites reforms for moral theology, requiring a shift from the traditional role of the moral theologian as an external judge to a more personalist role as a counselor for conscience. This change entails prioritizing the process of discernment ahead of the definition of rules, specifying the place of the ideal in Catholic morality, and attending to the ethics of ordinary life.

Keywords

Amoris Laetitia, conscience, moral discernment, moral norms, moral theology, Pope Francis

In the midst of Pope Francis's highly anticipated post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, the pope issues a simple request: "The teaching of moral theology should not fail to incorporate these considerations," he enjoins.¹ Like the

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1. Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* (March 19, 2016) 311 (hereafter cited in text as *AL*), https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf.

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Second Vatican Council's brief mention of "the perfecting of moral theology" in *Optatam Totius*,² this is a succinct statement with profound implications. If taken seriously, this invitation should occasion a radical reevaluation of the role of the moral theologian in the church. To that end, this article offers a three-part response to Pope Francis's recent summons. The first section discusses the significance of *Amoris Laetitia*'s account of conscience and discernment in order to articulate a general vision for moral theology that is consistent with the exhortation. The second section compares this vision with the historical role of the moral theologian in order to defend the assertion that *Amoris Laetitia* demands serious revisions. Finally, the third section assesses the practical implications of *Amoris Laetitia*'s general vision in order to design a constructive proposal for the role of the moral theologian in the church today. The result is a challenging reappraisal that expects moral theologians to promote a genuine culture of discernment in the church. This proposal is admittedly demanding, but it is emphatically necessary if Catholic moral theology intends to follow the course Pope Francis is publicly charting for the church.³

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2. *Optatam Totius* (October 28, 1965) 16, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_optatam-totius_en.html. For the lasting effects of this statement on moral theology, see Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal: A Study of the Catholic Tradition since Vatican II* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2003) 39; James F. Keenan, "Vatican II and Theological Ethics," *Theological Studies* 74 (2013) 171–72, doi:10.1177/004056391307400109.
 3. In addition to the contents of *Amoris Laetitia*, two features of Pope Francis's broader ecclesiological concerns suggest a similar trajectory for the ongoing development of moral theology. First, he has stressed collegiality, not just among bishops (expressed in his choice of "bishop of Rome" as his preferred title) but also among the church as a whole (expressed in his request for input from the laity during the preparations for the 2014 extraordinary synod). This speaks to the need for more collaboration in the church community, including communal discernment on moral matters. Second, Pope Francis has also called for "a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets," suggesting that the church—and moral theology—should be more attentive to the realities and complexities of life in the concrete rather than in the abstract. Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) quote at 49, see also 16, 31, 41 (hereafter *EG*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html; Richard R. Gaillardetz, "The 'Francis Moment': A New *Kairos* for Catholic Ecclesiology," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 69 (2014), <http://ejournals.bc.edu/ojs/index.php/ctsa/article/view/5509/4988>; "Vatican Seeks 'Widespread' Input on Marriage, Family Life Issues," *America*, November 18, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/vatican-seeks-%E2%80%98widespread%E2%80%99-input-marriage-family-life-issues>; Joshua McElwee, "Pope Francis Officially De-emphasizes Papal Titles," *National Catholic Reporter*, May 23, 2013, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-francis-officially-de-emphasizes-papal-titles>.

The Resources of *Amoris Laetitia* for Rethinking Moral Theology

While *Amoris Laetitia* is directly and primarily about the family and the challenges that families face while striving to live out their faith commitments in the contemporary world, the exhortation also offers tremendous resources for the faith lives of all Catholics. Precisely because the document seeks to help all families, including those in so-called “irregular” situations, navigate the tension between the gospel’s high ideal for family life and the inevitable imperfections of reality,⁴ the exhortation points to a process that can be adapted for the broader question of how Christians are called to live in the already but not yet. Specifically, *Amoris Laetitia* emphasizes the primary responsibility of conscience for the moral life, indicating that the crux of the moral life is discernment in one’s particular context. In the process of proposing this account of Christian morality, the exhortation significantly develops the Catholic understanding of conscience and moral discernment. By attending to the document’s discussion of these two concepts, one can better appreciate the theological development and, in turn, better appropriate that development for a productive reform of moral theology.

The primacy of conscience is hard to miss in *Amoris Laetitia*.⁵ “Though the word ‘conscience’ appears only 20 times in the Italian version of the exhortation,” notes James Bretzke in a commentary, “what the pope has given us is what I would call a ‘thick description’ of what following a formed and informed conscience looks like in the concrete.”⁶ Although Bretzke connects this assertion to *Amoris Laetitia*’s suggestions for a married couple’s decisions about “responsible parenthood,”⁷ the place where the primacy of conscience is most apparent is in the exhortation’s consideration of the possibilities for including divorced and remarried Catholics more fully in the life of the Church. Here, after citing the traditional teaching that concrete factors can influence subjective culpability for the agent who commits an objectively illicit act (*AL* 301), Pope Francis explains, “individual conscience needs to be better

4. See “Cardinal Schönborn’s Intervention at Presentation of *Amoris Laetitia*,” *Zenit*, April 8, 2015, <https://zenit.org/articles/cardinal-schonborns-intervention-at-presentation-of-amoris-laetitia/>.

5. This development stands in stark contrast to the *relatio* released at the end of the 2014 synod. The lack of a reference to conscience in that document prompted James Keenan to dedicate his 2015 “Moral Note” in this journal to the question of conscience. Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization: *Relatio Synodi*” (October 18, 2014), http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html; James F. Keenan, “Redeeming Conscience,” *Theological Studies* 76 (2015) 130, 146, doi:10.1177/0040563914565296.

6. James T. Bretzke, “In Good Conscience,” *America*, April 8, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/article/good-conscience>.

7. *Ibid.*, cf. *AL* 68, 167, 222.

incorporated into the Church's praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage" (AL 303). For this reason, Francis proposes an "examination of conscience" that will help divorced and remarried Catholics determine their subjective culpability for the end of their initial marriage and their immediate responsibilities to their new partner (AL 300).

This vision for conscience, and the process of its examination, establishes the foundation for the document's most widely asserted "development of doctrine,"⁸ which admits the possibility of readmission to the Eucharist for divorced and remarried Catholics, albeit on a case-by-case basis. Consider the hotly debated passage, which simply grants, "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" (AL 305). The footnote adds, "In certain cases, this can include the help of the sacraments," and includes explicit references to confession and the Eucharist.⁹ Notably, this statement and its oblique, accompanying footnote have been the subject of much debate,¹⁰ but the basic idea seems clear enough: an individual may have committed an objectively sinful action and yet she or he may not be completely morally responsible on a subjective level. Whatever one makes of the pope's pastoral application of this claim to the question of participation in the sacraments, the premise is consistent with the understanding of sin in the Catholic moral tradition. In fact, the distinction between mortal and venial sins admits that sins normally understood as "mortal" by virtue of their objectively sinful nature properly become venial sins for the individual who commits them without full knowledge and consent.¹¹ Thus, it is not surprising that *Amoris Laetitia* turns to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* when listing "mitigating factors and situations" (AL 301) that diminish, and in some cases remove, subjective culpability for an objectively sinful act (AL 302).

When Pope Francis links this distinction between objective gravity and subjective culpability to the "individual conscience" and insists on the need for a case-by-case discernment of moral responsibility (AL 303),¹² he is hardly presenting a radical new

8. "Cardinal Schönborn's Intervention"; Gerard O'Connell, "Pope Francis' Exhortation on the Family an 'Organic Development of Doctrine'," *America*, April 8, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/content/dispatches/pope-francis-exhortation-family-organic-development-doctrine>.

9. AL 305n351.

10. For two competing interpretations, see Edward Peters, "The Law before 'Amoris' is the Law After," *In the Light of the Law: A Canon Lawyer's Blog*, April 10, 2016, <https://canonlawblog.wordpress.com/2016/04/10/the-law-before-amoris-is-the-law-after/>; and Antonio Spadaro, "'Amoris Laetitia': Struttura e significato dell'Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale di Papa Francesco," *La Civiltà Cattolica* 3980, April 23, 2016, 105–28.

11. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 88, a. 2, c (hereafter *ST*); John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor* (August 6, 1993) 70 (hereafter cited in text as *VS*), http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_06081993_veritatis-splendor.html; *Catechism of the Catholic Church* 1862, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P6C.HTM.

12. See also AL 304–305.

idea. John Paul II made a similar connection in *Veritatis Splendor* when he discussed conscience and noted the possibility that “the evil done as a result of invincible ignorance or a non-culpable error of judgment may not be imputable to the agent” (*VS* 63). At issue, John Paul II explained, was the judgment of conscience, which is the basis of the distinction between objective sin and subjective moral responsibility. Tellingly, John Paul II was discussing the question of an erroneous conscience, though, insisting that precisely because the judgment of conscience is binding, one must follow an erroneous conscience and therefore he or she is not culpable if the erroneous judgment stemmed from invincible ignorance (*VS* 62).¹³ On one level, this seems to be exactly what Pope Francis is saying when he discusses the incorporation of conscience into the question of sacramental inclusion for divorced and remarried Catholics. After all, he does cite “ignorance” and “other psychological or social factors” when listing the mitigating circumstances that diminish subjective culpability (*AL* 302).¹⁴ Yet he also insists, “more is involved here than mere ignorance of the rule” (*AL* 301), and this is where the pope’s aforementioned request that “the teaching of moral theology . . . incorporate these considerations” takes on new significance (*AL* 311). If Pope Francis’s discussion of conscience were simply and exclusively a restatement of the traditional teaching on the effects of an erroneous conscience on moral culpability, there would be no real reason to call moral theologians to attention. That request, combined with the exhortation’s other comments on conscience, reveals that something more is going on, and if moral theology is going to take both of these aspects of *Amoris Laetitia* earnestly, a genuine reassessment of the role of the moral theologian is not only necessary but also obligatory.

Amoris Laetitia’s most consequential comments on conscience appear in two sentences in paragraph 303. The first sentence acknowledges the Catholic tradition’s typical teachings on conscience and indicates a development beyond that normal understanding. “Yet conscience can do more than recognize that a given situation does not objectively correspond to the overall demands of the Gospel,” the first sentence reads. The reference here is to the aspect of conscience that judges an agent’s actions, either during the process of deliberation that precedes an action or as part of a moral analysis that occurs after the fact.¹⁵ This judgment, in keeping with Thomas Aquinas’s simple definition of conscience as “knowledge applied to an individual case,”¹⁶ determines whether or not an individual’s course of action aligns with the more general moral norm that would typically govern similar situations. The way Pope Francis describes the operation in this sentence in *Amoris Laetitia* sounds specifically like the

13. See *ST*, I-II, q. 19, a. 5; cf. I-II, q. 6, a. 8, c.

14. Here, *Amoris Laetitia* cites *Catechism* 1735, http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5N.HTM.

15. This is Timothy O’Connell’s “conscience/3,” which Richard Gula identifies as “judgment.” See Timothy O’Connell, “An Understanding of Conscience,” in *Conscience: Readings in Moral Theology No. 14*, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004) 25–38 at 29; Richard M. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality* (New York: Paulist, 1989) 133.

16. *ST* I, q. 79, a. 13, c.

operation of a guilty conscience when it recognizes, *ex post facto*, a disconnect between one's action and the proper moral order. This aspect of conscience is well established in the experience of many Catholics approaching the confessional, where a guilty conscience has historically been the focal point of the conversation between penitent and priest.¹⁷ The notion of conscience as judgment may therefore be a consistent element of the traditional Catholic teaching, but it is not a sufficient description of the understanding of conscience presented in *Amoris Laetitia*. Instead, this traditional notion is only the first half of the exhortation's contributions to the theology of conscience, and the second half does most of the work.

After proposing that "conscience can do more" than judge in the first sentence, Pope Francis adds, "It can also recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God, and come to see with a certain moral security that it is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits, while not yet fully the objective ideal" (*AL* 303). This is not the straightforward notion of conscience as an act or "event,"¹⁸ nor is it the juridical conception of an impartial application of the law to specific circumstances.¹⁹ It is a much more personalist account that resonates with the dynamic understanding of conscience found in the work of European moralists during the mid-twentieth century.²⁰ Not coincidentally,²¹ this description of conscience also sounds like the famous claim of *Gaudium et Spes* that conscience is "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man . . . [where] he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths."²² In fact, Pope Francis's assertion that conscience can "come to see with a certain moral security that [this] is what God himself is asking amid the concrete complexity of one's limits" is not merely consistent with *Gaudium et Spes*'s definition of conscience; it presupposes that definition. What *Amoris Laetitia* describes is only possible if conscience is indeed the place of encounter with the divine, wherein God speaks directly to the soul and illuminates the correct path in the midst of conflicting demands and moral obligations. By taking this conciliar idea seriously, *Amoris Laetitia* significantly advances

17. John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987) 30–1.

18. O'Connell, "An Understanding of Conscience" 29.

19. See Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1999) 175.

20. James F. Keenan, "To Follow and Form Over Time: A Phenomenology of Conscience," in *Conscience and Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, and Institutional Responses*, ed. David E. DeCosse and Kristin E. Heyer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2015) 1–15 at 5–8.

21. Keenan, "Vatican II and Theological Ethics" 173.

22. *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965) 16, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html. This text put a significant emphasis on the primacy of conscience in Catholic moral theology. See John W. O'Malley, "Vatican II: Did Anything Happen?" *Theological Studies* 67 (2006) 29, doi:10.1177/004056390606700101.

the magisterial²³ understanding of conscience, representing another step in an ongoing process of development and reclamation of the tradition that has been active in the Church since Vatican II.²⁴ This, in turn, has implications for the field of moral theology, as the exhortation's application of conscience makes clear.

Of course, the exact nature and application of this revised notion of conscience is not immediately evident from the sentence that introduces it. Indeed, as with Pope Francis's comments on the church's sacramental practice, the meaning of *Amoris Laetitia's* definition of conscience has also been contested.²⁵ Nevertheless, the text of the exhortation does provide the basis for a clearer understanding of what it means to claim that conscience can do more than judge. Specifically, the surrounding paragraphs in *Amoris Laetitia* connect the sentences on conscience with the larger issue of discernment, a prominent theme in the document.²⁶ This indicates that the personalist, conciliar understanding of conscience found in paragraph 303 is a facet of personal moral discernment, and not just an identifier of rules to apply.²⁷

Discernment, as *Amoris Laetitia* presents it, requires a careful adjudication of an individual and her or his situation in all its complexity. "Therefore, while upholding a general rule," the exhortation notes just before the discussion of conscience, "it is necessary to recognize that responsibility with respect to certain actions or decisions is not the same in all cases" (*AL* 302). This would seem to speak to the distinction

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23. Here it seems worth noting that some have called into question the authoritative status of *Amoris Laetitia* as a magisterial document, citing claims in paragraph 3 that admit "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by interventions of the magisterium." As the rest of the paragraph goes on to elaborate, though, this statement acknowledges the need for inculturation and accepts the possibility of diversity alongside unity in the church. This statement (and the paragraph as a whole) does not speak to the authoritative status of *Amoris Laetitia* itself, which leaves one to conclude that the document has a magisterial status that aligns with its nature as an apostolic exhortation—it is a component of the ordinary papal magisterium. Raymond Burke, "'Amoris Laetitia' and the Constant Teaching and Practice of the Church," *National Catholic Register*, April 12, 2016, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/amoris-laetitia-and-the-constant-teaching-and-practice-of-the-church/>; cf. Richard Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2003) 79–81.
24. David DeCosse, "The Primacy of Conscience, Vatican II, and Pope Francis: The Opportunity to Renew Tradition," in *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Creating a Catholic Future*, ed. Paul Crowley (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2014) 156–69.
25. See Edward Pentin, "Moral Theology and *Amoris Laetitia*: Some Expert Assessments," *National Catholic Register*, April 22, 2016, <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/moral-theology-and-amoris-laetitia-some-expert-assessments/>.
26. James Martin, "Discernment: A Key to 'Amoris Laetitia,'" *America*, April 7, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/discernment-key-amoris-laetitia>.
27. Cf. Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth: Conscience in the Catholic Tradition* (New York: Paulist, 2000) 28–33.

between objective sinfulness and subjective culpability outlined above, but the exhortation takes this a step further when Pope Francis cites Aquinas's assertion that general norms "will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail" (AL 304).²⁸ On this basis, the pope insists, "It is true that general rules set forth a good which can never be disregarded or neglected, but in their formulation they cannot provide absolutely for all particular situations" (AL 304). Thus, the pope encourages a process of discernment in the case of integrating the divorced and remarried into the life of the church, suggesting that the Christian life is not defined by simple rules in black and white but incarnated richly in shades of gray (AL 305). At the heart of these comments lies a reevaluation of the moral life in decidedly personalist terms: the Christian is not called to a set of rules but, rather, to a relationship with God. The process of discernment is designed to "find possible ways of responding to God and growing in the midst of limits" (AL 305), and conscience is an invaluable tool in this task because it is the core where a person determines what God is calling him or her to do in the concrete (see again AL 303).

As *Amoris Laetitia* is at pains to point out, this understanding of discernment and of the workings of conscience does not abrogate the need for moral norms, nor does it devolve into relativism. Instead, this conception of the moral life as an ongoing relationship with God presumes the clear identification of an absolute and unchanging ideal. While this is most apparent in the exhortation's statements on marriage (AL 307), it is also evident in the broader question of moral discernment. Recall the way Pope Francis described the functioning of conscience as recognizing "what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God," an action that requires acknowledging the distance from "the objective ideal" (AL 303). Conscience in this function is supposed to be in constant contact with the ideal, always seeking ways of getting closer to the ideal as the proper end. "This discernment is dynamic," the pope explains; "it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized" (AL 303). What Pope Francis describes is an ongoing process, which makes the moral life sound much like the ideal of marriage "as a dynamic path to personal fulfillment . . . [and not] a lifelong burden" (AL 37).²⁹

28. Citing Aquinas, *ST I-II*, q. 94, a. 4.

29. Interestingly, Pope Francis suggests that the conceptualization of pastoral discernment informing this picture of the moral life is consistent with John Paul II's affirmation of the "law of gradualness" in *Familiaris Consortio* (AL 295). A close analysis of that idea, as it appears in *Familiaris Consortio*, suggests that Pope Francis's proposal is actually more in line with what Jason King has identified as "Gradualism as Pastoral Practice," which John Paul II seemed to repudiate. The difference between this type of gradualism and the law of gradualness found in *Familiaris Consortio* (which King calls "Gradualism as Growth in Holiness") reflects the distinction between the exculpatory aspects of an erroneous conscience and the liberating possibilities of a personalist conscience discussed above. Precisely because Pope Francis admits the possibility of conscience discerning the adequacy of a response to God that falls short of the ideal, the gradualism he discusses

These points about the role of conscience, the nature of discernment, and the place of ideals suggest not only a deeper understanding of the Christian moral life but also a reconceptualization of the function of moral theology. In this way, *Amoris Laetitia* provides the basis for a general vision of what moral theology might become. Thus, if the main moral task is to discern the demands of God in the midst of one's complex web of relationships and responsibilities, then defining the rules is not going to be enough. Instead of "a cold bureaucratic morality" condemned by Pope Francis (*AL* 312), the Church and its moral theologians must find ways "to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations" (*AL* 37). While this does not preclude clearly and persuasively presenting the objective ideal—both to critique the actions and ways of living that expressly contradict the ideal (*AL* 39, 297) and to reinforce the value of seeking the ideal in the first place (*AL* 38)³⁰—it still involves more than that. Hence, this dynamic and personalist account of the moral life envisions a different relationship to rules in moral theology.

A new relationship to rules in moral theology is certainly in line with broader trends in Pope Francis's vision for the church. For instance, in his address to the bishops at the conclusion of the 2015 Synod, Pope Francis insisted, "the true defenders of doctrine are not those who uphold its letter, but its spirit; not ideas but people; not formulae but the gratuitousness of God's love and forgiveness."³¹ Taking this assertion to heart and building on *Amoris Laetitia*, the point of moral theology must not be a rigid dogmatism that attempts to answer every possible question with sweeping pronouncements.³² Instead, moral theology "must leave room for the Lord," which means accepting uncertainty at times because, as Pope Francis himself has emphasized, "If a person says that he met God with total certainty and is not touched by a margin of uncertainty,

embraces something akin to the "different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations" that John Paul II denied. Granted, the type of gradualism found in *Amoris Laetitia* is not completely in line with gradualism as pastoral practice, which, as King defines it, calls specific norms into question at a general, and not just particular level. Pope Francis's presentation of the ideal in *Amoris Laetitia* expressly affirms the general norm while still allowing particular variation, and thus seems to walk a fine line between gradualism as pastoral practice, which *Familiaris Consortio* challenged, and gradualism as growth in holiness, which *Familiaris Consortio* affirmed. Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* (November 22, 1981) 34, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio.html; Jason King, "Which Gradualism? Whose Relationships?" *Horizons* 43 (2016) 87–95, doi:10.1017/hor.2016.4.

30. See also *EG* 168.

31. Pope Francis, "Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis" (Synod on the Family, Rome, October 24, 2015), http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151024_sinodo-conclusione-lavori.html.

32. Cf. *EG* 95; Pope Francis, *The Name of God is Mercy: A Conversation with Andrea Tornielli*, trans. Oognah Stransky (New York: Random House, 2016) 63–69.

then this is not good. . . . If one has the answers to all the questions—that is the proof that God is not with him.”³³ Indeed, the possibility of doubt and uncertainty, of a process of discernment that leads to a conclusion that does not fit in the standard box, is a logical conclusion of all that *Amoris Laetitia* outlines for the moral life. If God is understood to be as mysterious and infinite as the Christian tradition proclaims, and if conscience—the place where this infinite mystery speaks to the human heart on a personal level—is the true arbiter of moral discernment, then there must be some space for surprise and for new developments along the way.

To suggest this kind of contingency in moral matters is understandably unnerving. There is a fine line in this process, such that Pope Francis admitted to the bishops at the 2015 Synod, “what for some is freedom of conscience is for others simply confusion.”³⁴ Still, Pope Francis clearly has a preference for freedom of conscience despite the very real possibility of confusion. Consequently, moral theologians ought to dedicate their resources to addressing this concern. Adopting *Amoris Laetitia*’s emphasis on the primacy of conscience and the priority of discernment means, broadly, that moral theologians should offer the tools to help the church community distinguish genuine moral discernment from its corruption in self-deception, rationalization, and groupthink. Presuming the reality of uncertainty in the moral life, moral theologians should strive to help the faithful navigate the possibility of doubt so that they can still make moral choices with confidence and not just humility.³⁵

At times, moral theology’s efforts to address the question of contingency in the moral life will rightly require statements of certain kinds of absolute norms, but *Amoris Laetitia* sets some important parameters for this task. First, the definition of absolute prohibitions should not be the primary focus of moral theology. *Amoris Laetitia*’s emphasis on conscience indicates that the chief locus of moral reflection is not the general but the particular. This means that the majority of moral decisions are not going to be made with reference to absolute moral norms; instead, these decisions will take place in an area where moral absolutes do not directly apply. By definition, moral absolutes do not admit uncertainty (*VS* 67), so if moral theologians are committed to the task of improving moral discernment in the face of uncertainty, as *Amoris Laetitia* demands, then they ought to direct more attention to those moral questions that do admit variety

33. Antonio Spadaro, “A Big Heart Open to God: The Exclusive Interview with Pope Francis,” *America*, September 30, 2013, <http://americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

34. Pope Francis, “Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops.”

35. Traditionally, moral theologians have regarded a doubtful conscience as an impediment to proper moral action. Thus, Alphonsus Liguori, the patron of moral theology, insisted one could not act licitly with a conscience in “practical doubt” about the right course of action—although, this was to be distinguished from a doubtful law. See Alphonsus Liguori, *Theologia Moralis* (Rome: Ex Typographia Vaticana, 1905) I.ii.22, cf. I.ii.26. While epistemic humility (i.e., admitting the possibility that one could be wrong) provides a way of dealing with doubt, moral theologians can still do more to empower conscientious action alongside this virtue. Lisa A. Fullam, *The Virtue of Humility: A Thomistic Apologetic* (New York: Edwin Mellen, 2009) esp. 135–73.

and doubt.³⁶ Second, the number of truly absolute norms should be low. An absolute pronouncement of an exceptionless norm is a serious statement, and one that should not be taken lightly. Further, the fallibility and limits of human reason suggest that the level of certainty required to define a universally applicable exceptionless norm will be a rare occurrence.³⁷ As a result, moral theologians and the church as a whole should regard the pronouncement of absolute norms more as a last resort than as the default position.³⁸ Finally, the determination of absolute norms should involve community discernment. This might occur on a variety of levels; for example, the magisterial condemnation of “direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being,” “direct abortion,” and “euthanasia” in *Evangelium Vitae* incorporated agreement and insight from the college of bishops around the world.³⁹ At the very least, there should be avenues for officially

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36. In fact, even the definition of an absolute prohibition, such as the declaration that certain moral acts are “intrinsically evil” on the basis of their object (*VS* 79–83), requires some degree of discernment in practice—at a minimum, to determine whether or not a particular act in question has as its moral object one that has been declared intrinsically evil. Therefore, additional tools for discernment will still be useful in those cases where an absolute norm does apply just as they will be helpful in the majority of cases where such absolute norms do not apply. See Jean Porter, “The Moral Act in *Veritatis Splendor* and in Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*: A Comparative Analysis,” in *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses*, ed. Michael E. Allsopp and John J. O’Keefe (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1995) 278–95 at 281–87.
37. Josef Fuchs, *Personal Responsibility and Christian Morality*, trans. William Cleves et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1983) 115–52, esp. 140–1; Jean Porter, *The Moral Act and Christian Ethics* (New York: Cambridge University, 1995) 38–39. In addition, the definition of an absolute moral norm requires a certain conventional understanding of the acts to which it applies, and this demands a degree of specificity. Hence, murder is often condemned as intrinsically evil but killing is not. This required specificity also militates against the proliferation of absolute norms because the value of absolutes diminishes as their applicability narrows and because consensus on these definitions is often difficult to achieve. Bernd Wanenwetsch, “‘Intrinsically Evil Acts’; or, Why Abortion Cannot Be Justified,” in *Ecumenical Ventures in Ethics: Protestants Engage Pope John Paul II’s Moral Encyclicals*, ed. Reinhard Hütter and Theodor Dieter (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998) 185–215 at 203–206.
38. An appropriate parallel here is the exercise of papal infallibility, which has “certain very definitive and exacting conditions” that are not normally met, so pronouncements of authoritative doctrines on the basis of papal infallibility are rare. Francis A. Sullivan, *Magisterium: Teaching Authority in the Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist, 2002) 99–109 at 99; see also Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Teaching with Authority: A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997) 222; Gaillardetz, *By What Authority?* 84.
39. John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (March 25, 1995) 57, 62, 65, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae.html. Tellingly, the encyclical uses slightly different formulations for each condemnation, suggesting different degrees of definitive authority. Consequently, there is some dispute about the status of these condemnations vis-à-vis infallibility. Francis

incorporating communal insights into decisions about absolute norms in order more formally to justify their universality.⁴⁰ In this way, determinations of absolute norms would better reflect Pope Francis's ecclesial vision, and the general thrust of *Amoris Laetitia*, by embodying what Christoph Theobald identifies as the "pastorality of doctrine," which assumes that God is at work in the lives of the faithful, who can therefore offer substantive contributions to the Church's understanding of doctrine.⁴¹ If all three of these parameters are observed, moral theologians will not reject absolute norms, but they will have to tread carefully when proposing moral rules. This, in turn, should allow moral theology to give a greater emphasis to the role of discernment in the moral life, just as *Amoris Laetitia* proposes.

Given this modified relationship between rules and moral theology, one can legitimately say that *Amoris Laetitia*'s vision for the moral life demands a reevaluation of the role of the moral theologian in the church. By shifting the focal point of morality from rules to a personal relationship with God, *Amoris Laetitia* places greater weight on individual consciences and adds substantial responsibility to the process of discernment. In response to this situation, moral theologians should attend to the challenges of discernment, creating the conditions that would support serious, and communal, deliberation about the normative ideals defining the Christian moral life and the degree of variety in specificity that might legitimately be permitted in relation to those ideals. As indicated above, this does not preclude the use of absolute norms to set certain boundaries, but it does demand greater flexibility and less centralized control. Hence, moral theologians will need to think less in terms of definitive determinations issued with a high degree of certainty and more in terms of processes for discernment. Following *Amoris Laetitia*, the chief goal of the moral theologian should not be a final decision; instead, it should be supporting a culture in the Church that empowers the

A. Sullivan, "The Doctrinal Weight of *Evangelium Vitae*," *Theological Studies* 56 (1995) 560–65, doi:10.1177/004056399505600309; cf. *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964) 25 (hereafter cited in text as *LG*), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html.

40. Thus, one of the critiques of *Evangelium Vitae*'s collegial pronouncements was its atypical character. Charles E. Curran, "*Evangelium Vitae* and Its Broader Context," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology: Readings in Moral Theology No. 10*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1998) 120–133 at 122. In addition, for all the promotion of *sensus fidelium*, there are few structures to incorporate the voices of the laity in church decisions. Albert Gelpi and Barbara Charlesworth Gelpi, "Epilogue: Recovering the *Sensus Fidelium*," in Crowley, *From Vatican II to Pope Francis* 170–80 at 175–76; Paul Valadier, "Has the Concept of *Sensus Fidelium* Fallen into Desuetude?" in *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: Plenary Papers from the First Cross-Cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics*, ed. James F. Keenan (New York: Continuum, 2007) 187–92.
41. Christoph Theobald, "The Theological Option of Vatican II: Seeking an 'Internal' Principle of Interpretation," in "Vatican II: A Forgotten Future," ed. Alberto Melloni and Christoph Theobald, *Concilium*, no. 4 (2005) 87–107. On the importance of this principle for Pope Francis, see Gaillardetz, "The 'Francis Moment,'" 75–79.

faithful to attend to the voice of God echoing in their depths on all moral matters. The exact nature of this process and its practical implications will be developed below, but for the moment it is sufficient to say that Pope Francis's vision for the moral life obliges moral theologians to remember that, like the Church as a whole, "we have been called to form consciences, not replace them" (*AL* 37).

The novelty of this calling is hard to overstate. Although a mandate to form consciences may seem an easy invitation for moral theologians to accept, the truth is that the shifts in moral theology envisioned by *Amoris Laetitia* are not minor revisions. They are fundamental changes that require a thorough reexamination of the role of the moral theologian in the Church. Indeed, the shift from rules and authoritative decisions to conscience and discernment amounts to a wholesale indictment of the standard operating procedures of moral theology in the Roman Catholic tradition. To appreciate the extent of these demands, a comparative account of the historical role of the moral theologian in the Church is necessary. While a full, exhaustive history is beyond the scope of this discussion,⁴² a more targeted history will serve the purpose of the argument here, which is to show that the typical role of the moral theologian in the Catholic Church has been something quite distinct from the role just articulated. Appreciating this historical contrast is vital, because an authentic response to the invitation contained in *Amoris Laetitia* will only be successful if it can overcome the weight of the status quo.

The Historical Role of the Moral Theologian

Historically, the discipline of moral theology has focused on deciding cases, rather than empowering consciences. As a result, the role of the moral theologian has primarily been to render judgment. To an extent, this is a logical extension of moral theology's roots in the practice of auricular confession. As John Mahoney has persuasively argued, "the Church's development and practice of the confessing of sins has been of profound importance in the making, and the interests, of moral theology."⁴³ Specifically, the preparation of qualified confessors required a study and explanation

42. There are already a number of lengthier histories available: Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*; John A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990); Charles E. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2013); Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States: A History* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2008); James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010). There are also three articles on the topic in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2003): F. X. Murphy, "Moral Theology, History of (To 700)" 9:858–861; Louis Vereecke, "Moral Theology, History of (700 to Vatican Council I)" 9:861–64; J. J. Farragher, "Moral Theology, History of (Twentieth Century Developments)" 9:864–65.

43. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* 1.

of the characteristics of individual sins, prompting moral theology⁴⁴ to focus primarily on determining the gravity of different sins in relation to each other. To this end, moral theologians contributed to the guidelines that priests would use in administering confession,⁴⁵ a process that kept moral theology one step removed from the formation of individual consciences, and thus at odds with the vision *Amoris Laetitia* presents. At the same time, this task led to a “preoccupation with sin” that turned the attention of moral theology to “the darker and insubordinate side of human existence” at the expense of “almost all consideration of the good in man.”⁴⁶ While this might have highlighted the situations that deviated from the objective ideal, it did not do anything to promote the inherent desirability of the ideal itself, just as *Amoris Laetitia* laments.

In fairness, not all works of moral theology that served to prepare confessors fell victim to this one-sided presentation of the moral life. Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*, for instance, was also written with an eye toward the preparation of priests, specifically Dominicans, whose charism regularly put them in the confessional.⁴⁷ This *Summa*, of course, presented moral theology in the key of virtue and vice as much as in the language of law and sin. Consequently, there is a clear sense of both the positive possibility of the ideal in the Christian moral life and the insufficiency of those choices and actions that contradict that ideal in Aquinas’s work, succinctly summed up in the presentation of the first precept of the natural law as a twofold obligation revealing, “good is to be done and pursued, and evil is to be avoided.”⁴⁸ Here one finds a more holistic vision of the moral life as “the journey of the Christian to God who is our ultimate end.”⁴⁹ In comparison with the penitential literature, this vision is much more consonant with the notion of personal growth articulated in *Amoris Laetitia*. In addition, the discussion of virtues, both in general and in their particular species, provides the basis for a process of moral discernment that could promote the workings of conscience as Pope Francis outlined.⁵⁰ Yet even Aquinas’s work is not enough to assert that moral theologians have had the kind of role in the Church that *Amoris Laetitia* would entail, for two reasons. First, the *Summa Theologiae* was still written for priests, and it was thus not intended

44. To a certain extent, the use of this term is anachronistic in this context because the phrase “moral theology” dates only to the twelfth century. Nevertheless, one can fairly identify these penitential texts as works of moral theology in the way that Mahoney and others do. Vereecke, “Moral Theology, History of (700 to Vatican Council I)” 861; cf. Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 4–6.

45. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* 5–27.

46. *Ibid.* 27, 28, 29.

47. Leonard E. Boyle, “The Setting of the *Summa Theologiae* of St. Thomas—Revisited,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen J. Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2002) 1–16 at 1, 7–9.

48. *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 2, c.

49. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 33.

50. Stephen J. Pope, “Overview of the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas,” in Pope, *The Ethics of Aquinas* 30–53 at 34, 37; see also Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future* 22.

for general consumption.⁵¹ If its positive vision had an impact on the lives of the faithful, it would have been mediated by the clergy; this was decidedly not the job of the moral theologian. Second, Aquinas's approach did not come to define the practice of moral theology in the Church, so his model is the exception that proves the rule.

After Aquinas, a theological dispute arose about the underpinnings of his moral theology, resulting in the growth of nominalism as an alternative basis for identifying the demands of the moral life. Instead of the Thomistic faith in the definition of universally applicable moral norms from a teleological analysis of human nature, nominalism argued that moral rules derived from God's free will, and therefore could not be specified at a general level.⁵² The growth of nominalism gave rise to casuistry,⁵³ which became the dominant mode of moral theology by the sixteenth century.⁵⁴ While a certain brand of moral theology inspired by the work of Aquinas did survive the wave of nominalism and the birth of casuistry, primarily among the Dominicans at Salamanca,⁵⁵ even that "strand" did not place the moral theologian in the kind of role that *Amoris Laetitia* demands because the recovery of Aquinas's moral theology was primarily focused on the application of law and not on the formation of consciences in light of both law and virtue.⁵⁶

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51. Although there is some debate on this point, even if Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae* had been written for "university students" (the opposing viewpoint), this would hardly have been a broad audience in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Thus, the *Summa* still would not have been widely distributed for general consumption. See Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 31; and Boyle, "The Setting of the *Summa*" 8; cf. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future* 22–25.
 52. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 43. This is not to say that morality is irrational or a-rational in the nominalist interpretation, merely that nominalism proposed a much different way of thinking about moral issues. Marilyn McCord Adams, "The Structure of Ockham's Moral Theory," in *The Context of Casuistry*, ed. James F. Keenan and Thomas A. Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1995) 25–52.
 53. Technically, nominalism gave rise to a particular form of casuistry, since the process of practical deliberation about ethical issues in light of concrete situations was not unknown prior to the Middle Ages. Albert R. Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry: A History of Moral Reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California, 1988) 47–74, cf. 101.
 54. James F. Keenan, "The Casuistry of John Major, Nominalist Professor of Paris (1506–1531)," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 13 (1993) 205–21 at 208, 216–18; Vereecke, "Moral Theology, History of (700 to Vatican Council I)" 862.
 55. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 44.
 56. Consider the two great representatives of this Thomistic recovery: Francisco de Vitoria and Francisco Suárez (admittedly a Jesuit, not a Dominican). The former's "fame chiefly rests" on topics related to "the most contentious juridical issues of the period," and he rightly bears the title of founder of international law. Meanwhile, the latter's magnum opus, *De Legibus*, is defined, both in title and substance, by a concern for the law. Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance, introduction to Francisco de Vitoria, *Political Writings*, ed. Anthony Pagden and Jeremy Lawrance (New York: Cambridge University, 1991) xiii–xxviii at xiii; Vereecke, "Moral Theology, History of (700 to Vatican Council I)" 862–63; Francisco Suárez, *De Legibus ac Deo Legislatore* (1612).

Meanwhile, the casuistry that dominated in the aftermath of nominalism did not do much to bring the role of the moral theologian closer to the one *Amoris Laetitia* envisions either.

In its earliest form, nominalist-inspired casuistry asked the moral theologian to weigh the unique circumstances of a particular case in order to render a judgment that applied to that case. Typically, individuals brought their cases to the moral theologian hoping to elicit an authoritative judgment on a practical ethical issue, often in connection with the economic pursuits that were novel at the time.⁵⁷ In these situations all parties operated under the assumption that the only opinion that mattered was the calculated determination of the moral theologian, who was expected to operate as an external authority. Rather than providing resources for the individual to decide moral matters with a well-formed conscience, the early casuists sought to make the decision themselves.⁵⁸ The later, “high” casuists assumed a similar role, typically issuing decisions in a way that did not reveal their method(s) of deliberation, thereby making it difficult for individuals to adapt a casuist’s approach in order to arrive at their own moral judgments.⁵⁹ The value and authority of their judgments was evident in the contemporaneous development of probabilism, which provided a means of navigating different decisions from moral theologians on similar cases.⁶⁰

In a certain way, probabilism offered a form of moral theology that could tolerate the licitness of departures from the more general norm in particular circumstances, and thus would seem to be in accord with some of the ideas about the function of conscience articulated in *Amoris Laetitia*. In reality, however, the focus of probabilism was on something else entirely, and its operation was, like casuistry itself, not designed to promote authentic moral discernment. The key question of probabilism, whether or not the argument for a deviation from the general norm was “probable,” hinged on two factors: its internal coherence (i.e., logic) and the weight of its author. The latter was highly significant, and for many probabilists was the main determining factor.⁶¹ As a result, probabilism presumed the weight of external authorities, not conscience. Indeed, the entire idea of probabilism was useless without a set of judgments to evaluate. Thus, like the system of casuistry it supported, probabilism asked the moral theologian to make decisions, not to provide resources.

Eventually, the reign of casuistry toppled, in part because of its reliance on external authority more than strength of argument.⁶² In the aftermath of casuistry’s demise,

57. Keenan, “The Casuistry of John Major” 212, 218.

58. *Ibid.* 218.

59. Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* 251.

60. *Ibid.* 164–75; Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* 136–37.

61. Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* 167–68.

62. *Ibid.* 169. Blaise Pascal famously wrote an acerbic critique of casuistry in his *Provincial Letters*, identifying the “doctrine of probable opinions” as “the spring and foundation of all this disorder,” and insisting that deference to any potentially “probable” decision led to the absurd conclusion that contradictory opinions were equally legitimate in virtually all cases. He readily cited some of the most extreme conclusions of the casuists, including

moral theology reverted to one of its original objectives: preparing confessors.⁶³ Without the need to settle practical questions for individual petitioners, moral theology turned its attention to the theoretical realm of potential sins. This began with attempts to summarize the decisions of the casuists, which led to the creation of abstract principles for adjudicating varying degrees of sinfulness.⁶⁴ The resulting textbooks, the famed moral manuals, became the main source of moral theology in the Catholic Church, and provided the basis for priestly formation through the mid-twentieth century.⁶⁵ While some have argued that the moral manuals recaptured Aquinas's vision for moral theology,⁶⁶ the truth of the matter is that the manuals, unlike Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*, were much more concerned with defining and identifying sins than they were with specifying a holistic vision for the moral life—let alone a call to personal growth and conscience formation.⁶⁷ As James Keenan has explained, rather than embracing the twofold summons of Aquinas's moral theology, the moral manuals regularly reduced the moral life to the latter half: avoiding evil.⁶⁸ In this sense the manualist tradition is at odds with the *Amoris Laetitia*'s vision for moral theology, but even more fundamentally, the basic equation of moral theology with the moral manuals meant that the role of the moral theologian was far removed from the realm of conscience formation.⁶⁹ This became increasingly true in the decades immediately

the claim that one might legitimately kill in defense of one's honor—a proposal to which Pascal dedicated an entire letter. While Pascal's criticisms may have been truly applicable not to "all casuistry, but only [to] its abuses," his onslaught had the intended effect, dealing casuistry a serious, if not mortal, blow. When this damaged reputation combined with subsequent developments in the Catholic Church and in the broader intellectual climate, casuistry lost even more ground, and by the start of the eighteenth century it had virtually disappeared from Catholic moral theology. Blaise Pascal, *Provincial Letters, Containing an Exposure of the Reasoning and Morals of the Jesuits* (New York: J. Leavitt, 1828) 71, 77, 95–110; Jonsen and Toulmin, *The Abuse of Casuistry* 15–16 quoting Kenneth Kirk, see also 249, 269–78.

63. Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* 26–27.

64. Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 4; cf. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future* 36–37.

65. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 21; Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 9.

66. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future* 37, 50–65.

67. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 61–62; Thomas Bouquillon, "Moral Theology at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *Catholic University Bulletin* 5 (1899) 258–62, 264–65.

68. Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 12.

69. One need only think of the much remarked preface to Thomas Slater's moral manual: "manuals of moral theology are technical works intended to help the confessor and the parish-priest in the discharge of their duties. They are not intended for edification, nor do they hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful." Thomas Slater, *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-Speaking Countries*, 3rd ed. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908) 1:5–6.

preceding the Second Vatican Council, when the Vatican increasingly issued definitive statements on moral matters, expecting moral theologians to reinforce and pass on the judgments. The assumption of the guild was that the laity was not capable of the complex task of moral discernment, so the Church assigned the moral theologian to do the heavy lifting for them.⁷⁰ In other words, rather than forming consciences, the moral theologian was tasked with replacing them.

While this mode of operation did begin to shift in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, which “changed the primary focus of moral theology from the manualistic concern of preparing confessors to the concern of living out the full Christian life,”⁷¹ Catholic moral theology had a lot of inertia to overcome. Consequently, the role of the moral theologian was not quick to adapt, and if the controversy over *Humanae Vitae* (especially in the United States) showed anything, it was that debates in moral theology still presumed the casuistic and manualistic understanding of the moral theologian as an external authority to be sought out for the sake of definitive judgment rather than a resource for the development of a strong, personalist conscience.⁷² To an extent, this reflects the observation of Linda Hogan that in “the history of moral theology and especially the history of conscience . . . there were many contradictions and ambiguities that have never been resolved.”⁷³ Without addressing these issues, moral theology as a discipline could never completely change. The problem of these ambiguities has only been reinforced by the persistence of tensions between the more personalist notion of conscience found in nascent form in *Gaudium et Spes* and the subsequent application of a more institutionally determined form of conscience, which presumes that an external authority will definitively settle every moral question.⁷⁴ Thus, even though a number of individual moral theologians have worked to develop a personalist theory of conscience and to articulate the processes involved in embodying that

70. Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 30; Keenan, “Vatican II and Theological Ethics” 165–66; Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 201.

71. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology* 224, see also 224–52; Odozor, *Moral Theology in an Age of Renewal* 31–43; Norbert J. Rigali, “Moral Theology, History of (Contemporary Trends),” *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed., 9:865–70, esp. 865–66. In addition, there were other moral theologians who embodied this commitment even before Vatican II. See Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 35–110; Keenan, “Vatican II and Theological Ethics” 165–71. The best example is arguably Odon Lottin, whose *Morale Fondamentale* gave conscience a central place in the moral life, arguing that the individual is never faced with choosing the good *in se*, but only the good presented in concrete acts, which conscience is required to adjudicate. The work also dedicated large sections to the formation of conscience and the formation of prudential judgment. Odon Lottin, *Morale Fondamentale* (Tournai: Desclée, 1954) 142–43, 297–470.

72. Keenan, “To Follow and to Form Over Time” 9–12; Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States* 111–12; cf. Keenan, “Redeeming Consciences” 134–35.

73. Hogan, *Confronting the Truth* 102.

74. *Ibid.* 121–26.

theory in practice,⁷⁵ the recognized role of the moral theologian in the Church has not reflected a similar transformation. Instead, his or her role sounds consistently like the translator of norms rather than the counselor of conscience.⁷⁶ Given this history, and this contemporary reality, the shifts in moral theology demanded by an authentic response to *Amoris Laetitia* do indeed amount to a radical reevaluation of the role of the moral theologian.

The Role of the Moral Theologian after *Amoris Laetitia*: A Constructive Proposal

While *Amoris Laetitia*'s treatment of conscience and discernment suggests a much different role for the moral theologian than she or he has historically occupied in the Church, this observation alone is not sufficient for effective reform. If the field of moral theology is truly going to respond to Pope Francis's summons, some kind of concrete vision will offer the best path forward. This is especially true in light of the history just articulated, for the changes occasioned by *Amoris Laetitia*'s vision of the moral life will have to overcome an existing state of affairs that has successfully preserved its place for centuries. Fortunately, Pope Francis's exhortation offers resources for the construction of a more concrete vision for the field of moral theology, pointing to the idea that the role of the moral theologian is best defined as working to create a culture of moral discernment in the Church. This vision, in turn, yields a constructive proposal with three immediate steps to guide the reform of moral theology.

Amoris Laetitia's main insight into the question of discernment is stated early in the document: "not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by the interventions of the magisterium. Unity of teaching and practice is certainly necessary in the Church, but this does not preclude various ways of interpreting some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain conclusions from it" (*AL* 3). Coupled with the discussion of conscience and the process of pastoral discernment (*AL* 300, 311) this theological *modus operandi* indicates that the real work of moral discernment will take place in the particular rather than the universal. This task carries with it a unique set of risks and challenges, and if this process is to become more common, then addressing the unique concerns that accompany discernment in particular matters

75. In addition to Hogan, *Confronting the Truth*, see also Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience: Feminist Explorations in Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1996); Sidney Callahan, *In Good Conscience: Reason and Emotion in Moral Decision-Making* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991); Charles E. Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today* 172–96.

76. See *VS* 110; see also Joseph Fuchs, "Teaching Morality: The Tension between Bishops and Theologians within the Church," in *Dissent in the Church: Readings in Moral Theology No. 6*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1988) 330–53 at 337; Mary Frohlich, "Will the Church of the Twenty-First Century Be a Holy and Discerning People?" in Allsopp and O'Keefe, *Veritatis Splendor: American Responses* 106–18, esp. 110–11.

offers the means to thicken the practical implications of *Amoris Laetitia*'s general vision for the role of the moral theologian in the Church.

The most pertinent concern when addressing moral matters in their particularity is error. As Pope Francis states in *Amoris Laetitia*, citing Aquinas's distinction between primary and secondary precepts of the natural law, "The [moral] principle will be found to fail, according as we descend further into detail" (*AL* 304).⁷⁷ For Aquinas, this claim implied two corollary conclusions. First, secondary and subsequent precepts could admit legitimate variation on the basis of particular circumstances.⁷⁸ Second, secondary precepts might be misunderstood or erroneously applied. Thus, when the central moral question is the discernment of conscience in particular cases, the possibility of error is a very real concern because one could either make the wrong decision about the legitimacy of variation or mistakenly identify the wrong norm. Faith in the guidance of the Holy Spirit can help to ameliorate fears of error, especially when conscience is understood as the voice of God's very self, but this still does not eliminate the possibility of error because misinterpretation and self-deception are still possible. Traditionally, the Catholic Church has relied on the magisterium to provide assurance in moral matters, asserting that the Holy Spirit is active in the institutional church in a way that protects against error.⁷⁹ While some have disputed the application of this claim to all teachings of the magisterium,⁸⁰ one does not need to affirm any particular form of dissent to recognize the persistence of the problem of error whenever finite humans attempt to capture some aspect of the mystery of the divine.⁸¹ On the one hand, there is the matter of change in magisterial teaching over time, which has occasionally led to the practical reversal of the magisterium's position on certain moral matters.⁸² On the other hand, there are also those issues that are left unaddressed by the magisterium, which would not benefit from the same assurances. For both of these reasons, the faithful must contend, at a minimum, with the *possibility* of error in their discernment of particular moral matters.

In the face of this reality, communal discernment is more important than ever. First, if one adopts a certain degree of epistemic humility about her or his moral conclusions,

77. Citing *ST* I-II, q. 94, a. 4, c.

78. Aquinas specifically references possible circumstances under which the generally applicable principle "goods entrusted to another should be restored to their owner" might not apply, "for instance, if they are claimed for the purpose of fighting against one's country." *Ibid.*

79. See, for example, Pope Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae* (July 25, 1968) 29, http://w2.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_25071968_humanae-vitae.html; *VS* 27, 64.

80. Curran, *Catholic Moral Theology in the United States* 111–20.

81. See Karl Rahner, "What is a Dogmatic Statement?" in *Later Writings*, trans. Karl-H. Kruger, *TI* 5 (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966) 42–66, esp. 45–46, 58–59.

82. John T. Noonan, *A Church That Can and Cannot Change: The Development of Catholic Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2005); Charles E. Curran, ed., *Change in Official Catholic Moral Teachings: Readings in Moral Theology No. 13* (New York: Paulist, 2003).

then conversations with others—especially those with whom one might disagree—offer a valuable opportunity to reexamine one’s moral conclusions, either reconfirming their veracity or inviting their reform.⁸³ Second, the realities of “standpoint epistemology” assert that a person’s context and experiences influence the intellectual blind spots she or he brings to a contested question.⁸⁴ Consequently, a discernment process that invites multiple perspectives to reflect on the same moral question has a greater likelihood of avoiding the sorts of errors that are produced by overlooking a pertinent aspect of the situation at hand.⁸⁵ In fact, Aquinas himself proposed this sort of solution to the issue of error in “contingent particular cases,” asserting that these matters “are considered by several with greater clarity, since what one takes note of, escapes the notice of another.”⁸⁶ Third, even the virtue of prudence, which is a classical resource for the determination of right conduct in particular situations,⁸⁷ is a virtue that must be “taught by others” if it is going to develop properly.⁸⁸ Taken together, these factors indicate that communal discernment is a necessary response to the problem of error in moral judgment,⁸⁹ and thus an essential component of the reevaluation of moral theology in light of *Amoris Laetitia*.

Of course, there is a potential objection that one might raise to this emphasis on communal discernment. The main elements of *Amoris Laetitia* linking the exhortation to reforms in moral theology are the document’s emphasis on conscience and discernment. The judgment of conscience, precisely because it is a judgment that applies to a concrete particular, is a judgment made for and by an individual. A person must arrive at an answer to these questions in her or his own conscience and cannot rely on the decision of someone else’s conscience.⁹⁰ Thus, the process of communal discernment

83. The value of this practice is defended by one of the most famous proponents of epistemic humility in moral matters, Jeffrey Stout. Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics after Babel: The Language of Morals and Their Discontents* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 2001) 28–32.

84. Sandra Harding, “Rethinking Standpoint Epistemology: What Is ‘Strong Objectivity’?” in *Feminist Epistemologies*, ed. Linda Alcoff and Elizabeth Potter (New York: Routledge, 1993) 49–82.

85. One can identify a similar trajectory in the argument of those liberation theologians who insist that theology as a whole must incorporate the voices of the poor and marginalized precisely because the assessment of the theological situation is incomplete without these perspectives. Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001) 3–8.

86. *ST* I-II, q. 14, a. 3, c; see also Daniel J. Daly, “The Relationship of Virtues and Norms in the *Summa Theologiae*,” *The Heythrop Journal* 51 (2010) 221–23, doi:10.1111/j.1468-2265.2009.00561.x.

87. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1140a24–1141b23.

88. Daly, “The Relationship of Virtues and Norms” 219–21; *ST* II-II, q. 49, a. 3, c.

89. There are also prominent parallels here with the doctrine of the *sensus fidelium*, which is inerrant “when ‘from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful’ [the holy people of God] show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals.” *LG* 12; see also Hogan, *Confronting the Truth* 185–86.

90. Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith* 133.

may seem to invite other people's consciences to make the decisions that an individual should make for himself or herself.⁹¹ This objection, however, misstates the nature of conscience's holistic function in the moral life. Granted, conscience issues judgments for individuals, but these are not supposed to be individualistic judgments. Instead, conscience is to be formed in conversation with the community of faith and its dictates are properly developed with a genuine concern for the social implications of personal actions.⁹² Incorporating communal discernment into the conscience's process of reflection and judgment therefore ensures that conscience functions responsibly while also combating the risks of error.⁹³ Indeed, since the possibility of error is greater when dealing with particularities, the more moral theology embraces the vision of *Amoris Laetitia* for a conscience-based approach to the moral life, the more the field will need to encourage communal discernment.

Unfortunately, as the discussion of the history of moral theology has already indicated, communal discernment is not an area in which moral theology has traditionally excelled. In terms of addressing the complexities of life, Catholic moral theology has more readily proposed a prophetic approach that concentrates on "safety" and certainty rather than nuance. The alternative, a pilgrim perspective that acknowledges the eschatological not yet alongside the prophetic already, has not received enough

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91. For instance, Dana Dillon and David McCarthy have argued, "Freedom of conscience, therefore, from a Christian point of view is not freedom from God's law; rather, it is *freedom from human interference* in order to choose and move toward the good." Dana Dillon and David Matzko McCarthy, "Natural Law, Law, and Freedom," in *Gathered for the Journey: Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective*, ed. David Matzko McCarthy and M. Therese Lysaught (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007) 153–76 at 173, emphasis added.
92. Hogan, *Confronting the Truth* 190; Anne E. Patrick, *Liberating Conscience* esp. 8–16, 34–39; Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity* (New York: Seabury, 1978) 1:265–70; Robert J. Smith, *Conscience and Catholicism: The Nature and Function of Conscience in Contemporary Roman Catholic Moral Theology* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998) 84, 130, 131–32; Paul Philibert, "The Search for an Adequate Theological Method in the Formation of Conscience," in *Catholic Conscience Foundation and Formation: The Proceedings of the Tenth Bishops' Workshop Dallas, Texas*, ed. Russell E. Smith (Braintree, MA: Pope John Center, 1991) 77–94 at 86–87, 90. There is also the issue of collective guilt: Keenan, "Redeeming Conscience" 134–38; cf. Daniel K. Finn, "Can an Organization Have a Conscience? Contributions from Social Science to Catholic Social Thought," in DeCosse and Heyer, *Conscience and Catholicism* 167–81 at 168–69, 179–80.
93. Importantly, this must be a dialectical process, allowing individual consciences to critique the mores of the community, which might themselves be in error. Joseph Ratzinger, "Keynote Address: Conscience and Truth," in Smith, *Catholic Conscience* 7–27 at 13–14; see also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

attention.⁹⁴ As a result, Catholic moral theology is still well equipped to offer answers, but not prepared to support a process of moral discernment. Even when the faithful find themselves interested in communal discernment and deliberation, they quickly discover that there are too few resources to help them navigate this challenging task because “the current climate . . . value[s] external conformity over honest disagreement on moral matters.”⁹⁵ What the Church needs is a set of resources that will help individuals adjudicate the ethical decisions they have to face in their pilgrim lives on earth, a sort of common language that will allow people to explain the processes behind their decisions so that their moral choices do not have to be made alone, but can instead occur in a spirit of communal discernment. This is the task that ought to define the role of the moral theologian in the Church.

To put this task in other terms, one might say that, consistent with *Amoris Laetitia*, the specific role of the moral theologian is to create a culture of moral discernment in the Church. This is especially apt when one adopts Ann Swidler’s famous definition of culture “as a ‘tool kit’ of symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems.”⁹⁶ If the Catholic Church had an authentic culture of moral discernment, then the faithful would have a tool kit of resources to help them sort through the contingencies and complexities that make decisions of conscience so intimately particular. Catholics would then be prepared for the type of nuanced discernment that *Amoris Laetitia* suggests is at the heart of the Christian moral life. Just as importantly, that tool kit would be a shared resource, meaning that Catholics would be able to discuss openly the means of discernment used in a particular decision of conscience, and others would be able to reflect on that process and contribute to it in a way that might mitigate the potential for error.

This communal setting will be especially important if one takes all the possibilities of *Amoris Laetitia*’s discussion of conscience and discernment seriously. Recall that Pope Francis admitted that one could discern in conscience “with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God . . . while not yet fully the objective ideal” (*AL* 303). In such situations, error is arguably a greater risk not just because particular judgments are at hand but also because the acceptance of distance from the ideal can be easily colored by self-deception. Fortunately, a culture of moral discernment that both invites and empowers communal conversations about the process of responding to God in a way that departs from the ideal is a

94. For this distinction, see M. Cathleen Kaveny, “Tax Lawyers, Prophets, and Pilgrims: A Response to Anthony Fisher,” in *Cooperation, Complicity, and Conscience: Problems in Healthcare, Science, Law and Public Policy*, ed. Helen Watt (London: Linacre Center, 2005) 65–88 at 73–76; cf. Anthony Fisher, “Cooperation in Evil: Understanding the Issues,” in Watt, *Cooperation, Complicity, and Conscience* 27–64.

95. Hogan, *Confronting the Truth* 6.

96. Ann Swidler, “Culture in Action: Symbols and Strategies,” *American Sociological Review* 51 (1986) 273, see also 277, <http://www.asanet.org/sites/default/files/savvy/introsociology/Documents/ASRSwidler1986.pdf>.

necessary check against these dangers. In addition, such a culture also provides a degree of accountability, which is essential because, again, according to *Amoris Laetitia*, “this discernment is dynamic; it must remain ever open to new stages of growth and to new decisions which can enable the ideal to be more fully realized” (AL 303). This dynamic nature means that the discernment of a response that is “not yet fully the objective ideal,” while potentially legitimate, is also always contingent. Should circumstances change, one might again be called, in conscience, to embrace fully the objective ideal. Like the discernment of the licitness of straying from the ideal in the first place, the determination that one is called to re-embrace the ideal is also prone to self-deception and inertia. Communal accountability will therefore be a particularly valuable asset for this whole endeavor.

For all these reasons, the pursuit of a culture of moral discernment is an appropriate way to redefine the role of the moral theologian in conversation with *Amoris Laetitia*, but that goal cannot be a mere abstraction. If moral theology is going to respond to Pope Francis’s invitation effectively and change the role of the theologian accordingly, the discipline will need to transform in concrete ways. So, by way of concluding, I will offer three practical reforms that the field of moral theology can adopt in its response to the moral vision of *Amoris Laetitia*.

First, moral theologians should give special attention to the process of moral deliberation. This is not to say that moral theology should prescind from questions about moral norms and avoid the production of rules, as the general discussion of the role of absolute norms in light of *Amoris Laetitia*’s vision for moral theology has already demonstrated. A space for rules, and not just absolutes, is still consistent with Pope Francis’s stated emphasis on individual consciences, for he has insisted that the need to attend to consciences in difficult cases “in no way detracts from the importance of formulae—they are necessary—or from the importance of laws and divine commandments.”⁹⁷ Thus, the attention to process does not negate the possibility of also providing answers. Nevertheless, if moral theologians are faithful to their revised role, they will find ways to articulate the steps used to reach particular conclusions whenever they offer answers so that others will have additional resources to adapt for their own situations. There is a certain precedent for this in the traditional “principles” developed in the aftermath of high casuistry,⁹⁸ although these principles will need to be presented differently⁹⁹ so that they can become more user-friendly. A good way to do this is for

97. Pope Francis, “Conclusion of the Synod of Bishops.”

98. Examples include the principles of cooperation, lesser evil, double effect, etc. See again, Keenan, *Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century* 4.

99. Traditionally, these principles were used in the moral manuals in a fashion that did not expect anyone but the expert moral theologian to utilize them for analysis. Thus, the manualists often included an exhaustive list of cases to which a given principle might apply so that individual confessors could rely on the moral theologian’s determination and would not necessarily have to employ the principles on their own. See, for example, Henry Davis’s comprehensive list of applications of the principle of cooperation: Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943) 343–51.

moral theologians to show the application of these principles to contested questions. A fine example is Paul Lauritzen's exploration of the question of embryonic stem-cell research, which adapted and applied some of the traditional just war principles to develop a conditional response.¹⁰⁰ One might not agree with his conclusions, but that is precisely the point. His method of deliberation is clearly articulated, allowing the community to challenge the process and not just the proposed solution. If moral theologians took this approach more regularly, a culture of moral discernment might become more of a reality for the whole church community.

Second, moral theologians should define the role and meaning of the ideal in the Christian moral life. If morality is to be recast in terms of ideals and growth, as *Amoris Laetitia's* discussion of conscience and discernment implies, then the Church will need a clearer sense of how one is supposed to respond to the ideal in good conscience. As a general guide, one would imagine a "stance"¹⁰¹ of deference to the requirements of the ideal and an expectation that any deviation from that ideal would require explicit justification. Accepting the first practical reform, moral theologians ought to give special attention to the processes that might lead to this justification. Here, again, the traditional principles of Catholic moral theology have relevance, especially the just war principles, which are properly employed to limit, rather than permit, the use of force so that this unfortunate deviation from the true Christian ideal of nonviolence would only be tolerated under the most restricted circumstances.¹⁰² Consistent with a stance of deference to the ideal, the traditional principles of discernment emphasized the imperfect nature of the exceptions they tolerated, typically insisting that "evil" was still being done.¹⁰³ Contemporary moral theologians can preserve this insight by emphasizing the virtuous role of regret in the pilgrim life. Specifically, they can balance the possibility of discerning a legitimate course of action that falls short of the ideal (as *Amoris Laetitia* permits) with an expectation that the individual will regret

100. Paul Lauritzen, "Neither Person nor Property: Embryo Research and the Status of the Early Embryo," *America*, March 26, 2001, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/332/article/ neither-person-nor-property>.

101. See Curran, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today* 30–59.

102. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *The Challenge of Peace* (May 3, 1983) 83, <http://www.usccb.org/upload/challenge-peace-gods-promise-our-response-1983.pdf>; see also Roland H. Bainton, *Christian Attitudes toward War and Peace: A Historical Survey and a Critical Re-evaluation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1960) 17–43.

103. See, for example, Bernard Häring's emphasis on the need for a proportionate reason in cases of cooperation, without which "the agent would show that he does not sufficiently abhor the evil result." Bernard Häring, *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, trans. Edwin G. Kaiser (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961) 293. In contrast, Peter Knauer's discussion of the principle of double effect emphasizes "commensurate reason" in a way that defines an action as good without underscoring the lamentable consequences of the (unintended) evil results. Peter Knauer, "The Hermeneutic Function of the Principle of Double Effect," in *Moral Norms and Catholic Tradition: Readings in Moral Theology No. 1*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1979) 1–39.

the circumstances that make it necessary to departure from the ideal.¹⁰⁴ At the same time, moral theologians should also encourage individuals in these situations to strive to change the circumstances that necessitated an exception in the first place so that the ideal can once again be realized.¹⁰⁵ With this stance and its practical application, moral theologians will be able to incorporate *Amoris Laetitia's* emphasis on the primacy of conscience in a way that preserves the function and value of the ideal as a genuine guide in the moral life. Furthermore, moral theologians will play an active role in underscoring the dynamic nature of moral discernment.

Third, moral theologians should also embrace their revised role by attending to ethical questions that arise in people's ordinary lives. To a certain extent, the rising prominence of virtue in Catholic moral theology has already occasioned this kind of shift with its insistence that virtue is a question in every part of one's life,¹⁰⁶ but the idea is that all areas of moral theology need to make some space for the consideration of quotidian issues. The importance of this attention to everyday concerns is a direct corollary of the commitment to a culture of moral discernment because the process of discerning is a practice, and like all practices, it is strengthened and refined with repeated application.¹⁰⁷ Thus, moral theologians should encourage individuals to examine the ethical significance of their everyday decisions so that they will cultivate the practice of moral discernment, thereby preparing themselves for the more challenging task of communal discernment. Some moral theologians are already doing this well,¹⁰⁸ but it is still a bit of a niche in the field. If moral theologians have a special role

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104. Consider Augustine's insistence that while wars could be morally justified under certain circumstances, the wise should nevertheless "deplore the fact that [they are] under the necessity of waging even just wars." Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans* 19.7, trans. R. W. Dyson (New York: Cambridge University, 1998) 929.
105. Again, the application of just war principles presumes this kind of orientation with the expectation, by virtue of the principle of right intention, that the violence of just wars is ordered to the restoration of peace. Richard J. Regan, *Just War: Principles and Cases* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 2013) 85–87.
106. Joseph Kotva, Jr., *The Christian Case for Virtue Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1996) 37. See also James F. Keenan, *Virtues for Ordinary Christians* (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1996); and Michael W. Austin and R. Douglas Geivett, *Being Good: Christian Virtues for Everyday Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011). Virtue ethics has also attended to the first concern, emphasizing the process of deliberation, in various ways, especially with its discussion of practical reasoning. See David Cloutier and William C. Mattison III, "The Resurgence of Virtue in Recent Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3, no. 1 (2014).
107. See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007) 187–94. This idea has a special pertinence for moral discernment because of this practice's close connection with prudence, a virtue that is developed with experience, not by abstraction. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1142a11–21.
108. See Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 2010); Michael Banner, *The Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human* (New York: Oxford University, 2014).

to promote and strengthen a culture of moral discernment, a concern for the ordinary will have to become a greater part of the standard work of the discipline.

Certainly, there are other reforms moral theologians can pursue in an effort to embrace the changes to the discipline that *Amoris Laetitia*'s respect for conscience and emphasis on discernment would entail. A greater attention to process, a new approach to ideals, and a greater focus on ordinary issues are obviously not sufficient conditions for a complete overhaul of moral theology, but given the historical role of the moral theologian, they are definitely necessary. Without these three changes, there is little hope of removing the vestiges of a system that expected the moral theologian to provide definitive judgments on behalf of other people. Yet *Amoris Laetitia* presumes a very different vision of the moral life and, concomitantly, calls for a very different form of moral theology. In order to take this vision and this call seriously, the role of the moral theologian must change, and it ought to change in pursuit of a culture of moral discernment. By embracing this goal, moral theologians will go a long way toward forming consciences instead of replacing them. These changes will not be easy, and a true culture of moral discernment will not emerge overnight, but immediate results are not the sole marker of success. The proposed shifts in the role of the moral theologian are not merely a means to respond to *Amoris Laetitia*, the impact of which is still unfolding. The revised role represents a much bigger project that seeks adequately to honor the dignity of conscience, which, as the voice of God echoing in the depths of the human heart, deserves the high esteem that a culture of moral discernment affords. That is a lofty ideal that can, and probably should, tolerate a lengthy process of reform.

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