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AMORIS LAETITIA: HAS ANYTHING CHANGED?

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Abstract

The reaction to Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* has been as contentious as the 2014 and 2015 Synods on Marriage and Family to which it is a response. In this essay we ask, did the Exhortation change anything Catholic and offer a twofold answer. No, it changed no Catholic doctrine; yes, it changed, in the sense of renewed, Catholic pastoral practice. We illustrate this answer by a consideration of both, by way of example, the long-standing Catholic doctrines of the freedom and inviolability of conscience and the influence of circumstances on the sinfulness of actions and, again by way of example, Francis' application of these two moral doctrines to the moral questions of cohabitation and divorce and remarriage without annulment.

Keywords: Cohabitation, Conscience, Divorce and Remarriage, Freedom, Law, Mercy, Moral Circumstances, Virtue

On March 19, 2016, following the Sunday of Divine Mercy, which for Pastor Francis is significant, Pope Francis published his response to the two Synods on the Family of 2014 and 2015, his Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (hereafter AL). The Synods discussed, sometimes very contentiously, a wide range of topics related to

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marriage and family. The reception in the Church of AL has been no less contentious, bishops and theologians advancing a wide variety of interpretations, four conservative Cardinals even implying that Francis has betrayed the Catholic tradition. In this divided context, we focus here specifically on the question that appears to be at the heart of the dissension, namely, has AL changed anything in the Catholic tradition. The answer we shall offer is twofold: no it has not changed any Catholic *doctrine* but yes it has changed, in the sense that there has been an “organic development of doctrine,” Catholic *pastoral practice*.

No one should be surprised at this pastoral renewal, for since his election Pope Francis has time and again showed himself to be primarily a pastor caring for a fragile flock. On his ordination as Bishop, he chose as his episcopal motto, *miserando atque eligendo*, signalling his desire and intention to be a merciful pastor to his Argentinian flock. Following his election as Bishop of Rome, he published the Bull *Misericordiae Vultus*, announcing 2016 as a year of mercy and signalling his desire and intention to extend that pastoral approach to his world-wide flock. He describes the requirements of that approach in two metaphors: pastors must take on “the smell of the sheep”¹ and get their shoes “soiled by the mud of the street” (AL, 45 and 308). Above all, they must follow the way of charity and mercy marked out by the Gospel Jesus and his command to “go and do likewise.”² “Conscious of the frailty of many of [the Church’s] children” (AL, 291), Francis’ way “is not to condemn anyone forever; it is to pour out the balm of God’s mercy on all those who ask for it with a sincere heart... For true charity is always unmerited, unconditional, and gratuitous” (AL, 296; see AL, 308). We are in full agreement with Bartholomew, the Patriarch of Constantinople, when he says that AL is about mercy, not about moral norms.³ We judge that it also mirrors a methodological shift underway in Catholic theological ethics, a shift from a focus on law to a focus on virtue. We consider Francis’ treatment in AL of conscience, the impact of concrete circumstances on moral judgment and guilt, and the hotly-debated question of communion for the divorced and remarried without annulment, to show how he sees mercy working out in practice. In that consideration we also verify our thesis: there is no doctrinal *novum* in AL but there is pastoral *novum*.

¹*Evangelii Gaudium*, 24.

²Luke 10:37.

³See <https://cruxnow.com-cns-2016/12/4>

1. Conscience

First of all, an elaboration of the ancient Catholic doctrine on the freedom and inviolability of personal conscience. Already in the thirteenth century, Thomas Aquinas established the authority and inviolability of conscience. “Anyone upon whom the ecclesiastical authorities, in ignorance of the true facts, imposes a demand that offends against his clear conscience, should perish in excommunication rather than violate his conscience.”⁴ No clearer statement on the authority and inviolability of conscience could be found. Seven hundred years later, the last hundred of which saw the rights of personal conscience ignored and/or suppressed in the Church, the Second Vatican Council’s *Dignitatis Humanae* declared the inviolability of conscience.

In all his activity a man is bound to follow his conscience faithfully, in order that he may come to God for whom he was created. It follows that he is not to be forced to act contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious.⁵

In the 1960s, these were words seldom heard in magisterial circles, but they are words deeply rooted in the Catholic moral tradition.

Conscience comes at the end of a rational process which is a process of experience, understanding, and practical judgment. Conscience is the practical judgment that this action is to be done and that is not, and a *moral* action is one that follows the practical judgment of conscience and an *immoral* action is one that goes against conscience. Since conscience is a practical judgment that comes at the end of a deliberative process, it necessarily involves the virtue of prudence, by which right reason is applied to action. Aquinas argues that prudence discerns the first principles of morality, applies them to particular situations, and enables conscience to make practical judgments that this is the right thing to do on this occasion and with this good intention.⁶ Prudence is a *cardinal* virtue around which all other virtues pivot, integrating agents and their actions, and, since it is proper to moral virtue to make a right choice,⁷ Aquinas holds that no moral virtue can be possessed without prudence.

⁴Thomas Aquinas, *In IV Sent*, d.38, q. 2, a. 4.

⁵*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3.

⁶*Summa Theologiae* II-II, 47, 6.

⁷*Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 65, 1.

Humans, unfortunately, as Pope Francis points out, are weak (AL, 291) and every judgment, even the most prudential practical judgments of conscience, can be in error. That raises the question of the erroneous conscience. Persons arrive at their judgments either by following the rational process outlined above or by somehow short-changing that process. In the first case, the subject may arrive at a right moral understanding and conscience-judgment about the object; in the second case, the subject may arrive at an erroneous understanding and conscience judgment about the object. If a decision to act follows a right understanding and judgment about the object, then conscience is also said to be right; if it follows an erroneous understanding and judgment, then conscience is also said to be erroneous. If the error of understanding and judgment can be ascribed to some moral fault, taking little trouble to find out what is true and good and right, for instance, or negligent failure to gather the necessary evidence, to engage in the necessary deliberation, to take the necessary advice, then the wrong understanding and the practical judgment of conscience flowing from it are both deemed to be culpable and cannot be morally followed. If the error cannot be ascribed to some personal fault, then both the understanding and the practical judgment of conscience flowing from it are deemed to be non-culpable and not only can but also must be followed, even contrary to Church authority, as Aquinas argued.

A decision of right conscience is a complex process. It is an *individual* process, but far from an *individualistic* process. The Latin word *con-scientia* literally means knowledge together, perhaps better rendered as to know together. It suggests what human experience universally demonstrates, namely, that being in consultation with others is a surer way to come to right knowledge of moral truth and right moral judgment of what one ought to do or not do. This community-basis of the search for Catholic truth, conscience, and moral action builds a sure safeguard against an isolating egotism and a subjective relativism that negates all universal truth. The community-basis of consciences has been part of the Christian tradition since Paul, who clearly believed in the inviolability and primacy of conscience (1 Cor 10:25-27; 2 Cor 1:12; 4:2). Bernard Häring calls it “the reciprocity of consciences.”⁸ It is within this reciprocity of consciences that Church authority functions, not guaranteeing conscience (historical errors preclude that simplistic

⁸Bernard Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, II, New York: Seabury, 1980, 25.

claim) but informing it to a right practical judgment. We are instructed here by Cardinal Newman's famous comment to the Duke of Norfolk. "If I am obliged to bring religion into after-dinner toasts (which indeed does not seem the right thing), I shall drink to the Pope if you please, still to conscience first and to the Pope afterwards."⁹

The long-established Catholic doctrine with respect to individual conscience, then, is this. Having made a sincere and informed practical judgment of conscience, no Catholic is "to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor... is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in matters religious"¹⁰ and, we add, moral. Joseph Ratzinger pointed out that "not everything that exists in the Church must for that reason be also a legitimate tradition... There is a distorting as well as legitimate tradition."¹¹ The long adherence of the Church to teachings on the taking of interest on loans, on slavery, and on religious freedom are well-known examples of distorting traditions that it now rejects. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* places the Church's teaching beyond doubt: Catholics have "the right to act in conscience and in freedom so as personally to make moral decisions" (n. 1782).

Pope Francis is well aware of this ancient Catholic doctrine and there is no *novum* when he highlights it in AL. "We," he argues, meaning Church pastors, "find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations." We have been called, he adds, understanding the Catholic importance of an informed conscience, "to form consciences, not to replace them" (AL, 37). Later he declares that "individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church's [pastoral] praxis in certain situations which do not *objectively* embody our understanding of marriage," for conscience can "recognize with sincerity and honesty what for now is the most generous [*subjective*] 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; emphasis added). The Pope

⁹Cardinal Newman, "Letter to the Duke of Norfolk," accessed at <http://www.newmanreader.org/works/Anglicans/volume2/Gladstone/section5.html>

¹⁰*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3.

¹¹Joseph Ratzinger, "The Transmission of Divine Revelation," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Vol. 3, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, New York: Herder, 1969, 185.

does not shrink from proposing “the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur,” but neither does he shrink from pleading with pastors “to show understanding in the face of exceptional circumstances” and to argue that such understanding and mercy “never implies dimming the light of the fuller ideal, or proposing less than what Jesus offers to the human being” (AL, 307). Put simply, while proposing the full Catholic ideal of marriage, he does not shrink from proposing also, and restoring to its proper place, the ancient Catholic doctrine of the freedom and inviolability of individual conscience.

2. The Moral Impact of Particular Circumstances

Some critics of Pope Francis argue that all an individual conscience has to do is to obey the objective moral truth proposed to it. That is contrary to Catholic teaching articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. “Imputability and responsibility for an action,” it teaches, “can be diminished and even nullified by ignorance, inadvertence, duress, fear, habit, inordinate attachments, and other psychological or social factors.”¹² When speaking of masturbation, it teaches that “to form an equitable judgment about the subject’s moral responsibility and to guide pastoral action, one must take into account the affective immaturity, force of acquired habit, conditions of anxiety, or other psychological or social factors that lessen or even extenuate moral culpability.”¹³ In the established Catholic moral tradition, any conscience decision must discern not only the objective moral truth proposed to it but also any and every relevant subjective circumstance in which moral action is to take place. This long-standing moral tradition is now validated by the research data of contemporary cognitive neuroscience where there is mounting evidence that emotion is “constitutive of, and not separate from, the reasoning and decision making that people do about their own values and the preferences and values of others.”¹⁴ Emotion serves to guide, control, and even on occasion inhibit individual attention and free will. The brain, Andrew Newberg asserts, “places functional restrictions on all thought processes, and hence [on] how we experience religion, spirituality, and theology.”¹⁵ It is no surprise,

¹²*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1735.

¹³*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2352

¹⁴Michael L. Spezio, “The Neuroscience of Emotion and Reasoning in Social Contexts: Implications for Moral Theology,” in *Modern Theology* 27 (2011) 346.

¹⁵Andrew B. Newberg, *Principles of Neurotheology*, Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010, 84.

therefore, to see Pope Francis clearly teach this doctrine in AL in several different ways, without in any way abandoning or diminishing Catholic moral doctrine. The Church, he argues, “possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it can no longer simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace.” Factors may exist, and we have named many above, which limit the ability to make a fully informed moral decision (AL, 301).

Speaking of those in what he calls the “irregular situation” of being divorced and remarried without annulment, Pope Francis acknowledges that they “can find themselves in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment” (AL, 298). In a footnote, he cites the Second Vatican Council’s judgment that even if they take the option of living as brother and sister the Church offers them, in this circumstance “it often happens that faithfulness is endangered and the good of the children suffers.”¹⁶ For these reasons, the Pope continues, “a pastor cannot feel that it is enough simply to apply [objective] moral laws to those living in ‘irregular’ situations, as if they were stones to throw at people’s lives. This would bespeak [not the merciful heart of a pastor but] the closed heart of one used to hiding behind the Church’s teachings... ‘judging at times with superiority and superficiality difficult cases and wounded families’” (AL, 305). His argument, of course, applies not only to divorce and remarriage, about which he is specifically speaking, but also to every other personal moral situation. He applies it to the consideration of several irregular situations, and we now consider two of them.

3. Irregular Situations

3.1. Cohabitation

Francis does not hesitate to set forth traditional Catholic doctrine about marriage. He does that in detail in Chapters Three and Four of AL, but he also recognizes the circumstances of spouses and the challenges they create for them. Following a path marked out by the 2015 Synod, he reflects on “the growing danger represented by an extreme individualism.” Individual freedom of choice, he argues, “makes it possible to plan our lives and make the most of ourselves.

¹⁶*Gaudium et Spes*, 51.

Yet if this freedom lacks noble goals or personal discipline, it degenerates into an inability to give oneself generously to others" (AL, 33). Such an individualistic attitude clearly can and frequently does inhibit the desire to become married and to remain married. "The fear of loneliness and the desire for stability and fidelity exist side by side with a growing fear of entrapment in a relationship that could hamper the achievement of one's personal [individualistic] goals" (AL, 34). There is also the influence of the circumstances created by materialism. "We treat affective relationships," the Pope argues, "the way we treat material objects and the environment: everything is disposable, everyone uses and throws away, takes and breaks, exploits and squeezes to the last drop. Then goodbye" (AL, 39). In his enumeration of the challenges facing Catholic marriages and families Francis does not spare the Church, which at times has "proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families" (AL, 36). He singles out the Church's presentation of marriage "in such a way that its unitive meaning, its call to grow in love and its ideal of mutual assistance, are overshadowed by an almost exclusive insistence on the duty of procreation" (AL, 36). Francis ends this section by a reflection on poverty and the "great limitations" it imposes on the desire both to be married and to remain married. "Rather than offering the healing power of grace and the light of the Gospel message [love and mercy again]" to people living in difficult social, cultural, and economic situations, he states, some in the Church use its moral teachings as if they were "dead stones to be hurled at others" (AL, 49, also 305).

For all these real reasons the traditional approach to sex, marriage, and family in the contemporary Western world, including among a majority of Catholics, has largely collapsed. When the *Lineamenta* for the 2015 Synod was distributed, Catholic Marriage Care in England, charged with the marriage preparation of those wishing to marry in the Catholic Church, responded that nearly all couples attending their marriage preparation courses were cohabiting. Couples asking to be married in the Church and not already living together is a rarity. There are multiple reasons for this cohabitation before marriage, and we have just seen Francis enumerate some of them, but he contents himself with the undisputed judgment that "in some countries, *de facto* unions are very numerous, not only because of a rejection of values concerning the family and matrimony, but *primarily* because celebrating a marriage is considered too expensive

in the social circumstances. As a result, material poverty drives people into *de facto* unions” or cohabitation (AL, 294).

Francis is adamant that “*de facto* or same-sex unions may not simply be equated with marriage” (AL, 52), but nowhere in AL does he condemn cohabitation in blanket fashion, as he would have to do if he were unmercifully throwing the stones of traditional Catholic sexual teaching at cohabiting couples. In contradistinction to the Synods’ *Relatio Finalis* which condemns all cohabitation, he makes a distinction between “cohabitation which totally excludes any intention to marry” (AL, 53) and cohabitation dictated by “cultural and contingent situations,” (AL, 294) which requires a “constructive response” that can lead to marriage when circumstances permit it. Ten years ago we introduced the Catholic Church in America to this real distinction and named the two types of cohabitation non-nuptial and nuptial cohabitation respectively.¹⁷ Fully aware of traditional Catholic teaching that every sexual act outside marriage constitutes grave matter and is *objectively* wrong,¹⁸ Pope Francis also recognizes that the tradition teaches the freedom and inviolability of conscience and the mitigating influence of circumstance, and he refuses to classify all cohabitation as *subjectively* sinful. Borrowing from Jesus’ treatment of the Samaritan woman and Saint John Paul II’s “*law of gradualness*,” he values nuptial cohabitation “in the knowledge that the human being knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth” (AL, 295). The Church must never “desist from proposing the full ideal of marriage, God’s plan in all its grandeur.” Aware, however, of all the psychological, historical, cultural, and “even biological” mitigating circumstances he has listed, neither must she ever desist from accompanying “with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively appear” (AL, 307). Again the law of gradualness and mercy. The biblical Jesus leaves his followers with two commandments: first, the great commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Mt 19:19; Jn 15:16); second, “judge not that you be not judged” (Mt 7:1; Lk 6:37) (see AL, 306 and 308). The Catholic Church, Francis argues, must heed these commandments

¹⁷Michael G. Lawler and Gail S. Risch, “A Betrothal Proposal,” *U. S. Catholic*, June 2007, 18-23.

¹⁸We refer to such acts as “objectively wrong,” though Pope Francis and Church documents continue to use the phrase “objective sin” (AL, 297), which mistakenly conflates what is *objectively* wrong with what may be *subjectively* morally culpable or sinful.

even if, in his moving metaphor, “her shoes get soiled by the mud of the street” (AL, 308).

3.2. Communion for the Divorced and Remarried without Annulment

The topic of sacramental communion for the divorced and remarried without annulment was the topic most fiercely debated at the Synods and the topic about which the Bishops were most divided. Before dealing with that topic, however, it will be instructive to deal first with both the teaching *and* the practice of the Church with respect to divorce and remarriage, for teaching and practice differ. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* articulates the teaching clearly: “the matrimonial union of man and woman is indissoluble: God himself has determined it: ‘what therefore God has joined together let no man put asunder’ (Mt. 19:6).”¹⁹ The Church claims that its teaching that a valid marriage is indissoluble is in fidelity to the Gospel words of Jesus. That claim might be legitimate if there was only one report in the New Testament about Jesus’ attitude to divorce, but that is not the case. The New Testament has five reports about divorce (Mk 10:11-12; Mt 5:32 and 19:9; Lk 16:18; 1 Cor 7:10-11), and what is noteworthy about them is that they are not all exclusively words of Jesus and do not all agree in prohibiting divorce, which was common practice in both the Jewish and the Greek cultures of the early Church. Paul reports Jesus’ prohibition of divorce (1 Cor 7:10-11) and immediately nuances it in the situation of his own churches (7:12-16). That nuance, permitting divorce and remarriage, passed into the law and practice of the Catholic Church as the Pauline Privilege. Matthew also nuances Jesus’ words with his own Jewish exception (5:32; 19:9), though biblical scholars are generally agreed that the meaning of the exception “is not self-evident to modern interpreters.”²⁰

The nuancing of the words of Jesus on the basis of contextual needs, validated by Paul and Matthew, was continued in the fourth century by the great Council of Nicea (325). That Council, whose Creed all Christians venerate, decreed that, in order to be reconciled with the Catholic Church, those who belonged to the rigorous sect called Novatians had to agree in writing with its teaching with respect to those who had been married twice (*digamoi*) and its practice of living in communion with them after they had been reconciled to

¹⁹*Catechism*, n. 1614.

²⁰See Raymond F. Collins, *Divorce in the New Testament*, Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992, 205.

the Church following a period of penance.²¹ That decree founds the practice of the Orthodox Churches known as *oikonomia*. The nuancing of the words of Jesus about divorce was continued in the sixteenth-century Church in the context of circumstances occasioned by the slave trade, and the decrees of Popes Paul III (1537), Pius V (1561), and Gregory XIII (1585) permitting divorce and remarriage passed into the Catholic tradition under the heading of the Petrine Privilege. In *theory*, the Catholic Church adheres to the Markan words of Jesus but in *practice* it adheres to the words of Paul, Matthew, and three renaissance popes. Since all the Catholic sources on divorce and remarriage, derived not only from Jesus but also from Paul, Matthew and the renaissance Church, are part of the received word of God in the Church, any effort to allow one instruction to override all the others as *the* word of God falsifies God's word.

The real doctrine of the Catholic Church with respect to the indissolubility of marriage clearly demonstrates that fidelity to the biblical words of Jesus is far from the only criterion for its judgments about indissolubility. That real doctrine is yet another nuance, introduced by the canonist Gratian of Bologna and accepted in the twelfth century Church, namely, that only that marriage "which is ratified [as sacrament] *and* consummated [by sexual intercourse] cannot be dissolved by any human power other than death" (Can. 1141). The two conditions which make a marriage absolutely indissoluble in the Catholic Church, that it be simultaneously sacramental *and* consummated, are nowhere ever even insinuated by Jesus. If what was established by God, namely, marriage and its bond, has been refined by the Church in the first century, the twelfth century, and the sixteenth century, what is there, many Catholic theological ethicists ask and many Synod Bishops asked, to prevent the Church from refining it again in the twenty-first century in the face of massive contextual need. One obvious and frequently-offered refinement is the embracing of the Orthodox practice of *oikonomia*. *Oikonomia* presents God as the merciful Father of a household (*oikos*) and the Church as the householder as merciful as the Father of the household (Lk 6:36; Mt 5:44-48). We note two important facts about *oikonomia*: first, it flourishes in a context of grace and virtue not of law; secondly, and importantly for the question at hand, the Council of Trent refused to

²¹See J.D. Mansi, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, Paris: Welter, 1903-1927, II, 672.

condemn it because it could not be proved that it did not have equal claim to the Gospel and to the name Christian.²² The 1980 Synod on Marriage and the Family asked Pope John Paul II to consider this practice but there has as yet been no response.

Francis shows his historically-conscious grasp of Catholic practice when he confronts “irregular situations,” specifically the irregular situation of those divorced and remarried without annulment. There are two ways, he declares, to deal with them, “casting off and reinstating. The Church’s way...has always been the way of Jesus, the way of mercy and reinstatement” (AL, 296), the way of *oikonomia*. The divorced and remarried are “in a variety of situations, which should not be pigeonholed or fit into overly rigid classifications leaving no room for a suitable personal and pastoral discernment.” He confesses that “no easy recipes exist (AL, 298), but “conversation with the priest, in the internal forum, contributes to the formation of a correct judgment on what hinders the possibility of a fuller participation in the life of the Church and what steps can be taken to re-establish it and make it grow.” To avoid any suspicion of laxity, discernment must include “humility, discretion, and love for the Church and her teaching, in a sincere search for God’s will and a desire to make a more perfect response to it” (AL, 300). The outcome of the discernment process is that conscience can recognize “with a certain moral security” that “a given situation does not correspond *objectively* to the overall demands of the Gospel,” that “what for now is the most generous [*subjective*] response which can be given to God,” and 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). There is no *novum* here. The Pope is simply re-stating what is ancient Catholic doctrine and practice, though that practice is mercifully and lovingly renewed.

4. Conclusion

There are, of course, other questions of interest in AL. There is Francis’ concern with poverty and its effects, especially on women and children in families worldwide (AL, 49). There is his judgment that Christian marriage demands that husband and wife be equal in their marriages. “Every form of sexual submission,” he argues, “must be clearly rejected,” and so must every improper interpretation of the passage in the Letter to the Ephesians where Paul tells women to “be

²²See Denzinger-Schönmetzer, 1807.

subject to your husbands.” This passage “mirrors the cultural categories of the time,” and does not apply in the cultures of our time, for love now “excludes every kind of subjection whereby the wife might become the servant or the slave of her husband” (AL, 156). What we have examined, however, is sufficient to answer the question posed in our title: *Amoris Laetitia: Did Anything Change?* The answer to that question, we have shown, is twofold: there is no change of Catholic moral *doctrine* but there is a change, in the sense of renewal, in the *pastoral application* of that doctrine. The absolute authority and inviolability of a sincere and informed conscience and the modifying impact of circumstances on guilt have long been Catholic ethical *doctrines*, and Pope Francis has merely brought them out of the shadows, where they have languished for centuries, and has placed them squarely in the forefront of Catholic ethical *pastoral practice*. Following Jesus’ practice and his instruction to “Go and do likewise,” he has abandoned the moral method that focuses only on law and has asked the Church to travel together²³ with him, *miserando et eligendo*, focusing on grace and virtue, particularly the virtues of mercy, love and prudence.

²³The English word “synod” derives from the compound Greek word *sun* meaning together and *hodos* meaning travelling or journeying.