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“Time is greater than space”:

Moral-theological reflections on the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia**

“The joy of love experienced by families is also the joy of the Church. As the Synod Fathers noted, for all the many signs of crisis in the institution of marriage, ‘the desire to marry and form a family remains vibrant, especially among young people, and this is an inspiration to the Church.’ As a response to that desire, ‘the Christian proclamation on the family is good news indeed’.”¹ This is how Pope Francis’ eagerly awaited Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation begins. On the one hand, he concludes here the synodal process of pastoral reorientation with regard to the accompaniment of families in today’s Church and world; on the other hand, however, he also gives the starting signal for a highly controversial debate about its interpretation and its implications for praxis. The open discussion that the Pope continues to want – a discussion that refuses to make insinuations about heresies – is doubtless a consequence of the conviction that the “synodal path” is a genuine theological locus of the experience of the Holy Spirit, which can lead to deeper insights into the faith and can make use of a communicability that is specific to the message of the Christian revelation,² in order to cope with the urgent problems and the complex situations that exist in marriage and the family today.³

From the very outset, the Pope made it clear that the synod was acting not only *cum Petro* (that is to say, “with the Pope”), but also *sub Petro* (that is to say, “under the authority of the Pope”) as the guarantor of the unity of the

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¹ Pope Francis, *The Joy of Love: On Love in the Family* (2016; hereafter: AL) 1 (papal documents are quoted from the official Vatican texts).

² On this, see F. Böckle, *Fundamentalmoral*, Munich: Kösel Verlag 1977, 234.

³ On the dogmatic character of *Amoris Laetitia*, see P. Hünemann, “Das Sakrament der Ehe: Eine dogmatische Lektüre von *Amoris Laetitia*,” in: *Theologische Quartalschrift* 196 (2016), 299-317, esp. 300-304. E. Schockenhoff is certainly correct in speaking of a far-reaching paradigm shift “within this doctrinal tradition,” which “can be characterized as the transition from a speculative-deductive method in theology to an inductive approach that attaches a higher value to the closeness to experience, and to the concrete appropriateness, of individual normative statements about the way in which believers lead their lives” (E. Schockenhoff, “Traditionsbruch oder notwendige Weiterbildung? Zwei Lesarten des nachsynodalen Schreibens ‘Amoris Laetitia’,” in: *Stimmen der Zeit* 235 [2017], 147-158, at 152).

Church.⁴ In other words, he is making use of his papal authority to lay down guidelines in the sense of a new theological overall picture of marriage and the family. This becomes clear when one reads *Amoris Laetitia* in the context of the Pope's first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*.⁵ And this is how it must be read, because it is an immediate application of the programmatic guiding principles of *Evangelii Gaudium*. The Pope recalls in AL 3 a principle that is already established in *Evangelii Gaudium*: "time is greater than space." In *Amoris Laetitia*, this means: "I would make it clear that not all discussions of doctrinal, moral or pastoral issues need to be settled by 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 consequence from it. This will always be the case as the Spirit guides us towards the entire truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does" (AL 3).⁶

In view of the present-day risk of getting entangled in a new casuistry with regard to the practical implementation of the statements in ch. 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*, it is advisable to understand the principle that "time is greater than space" in its universal significance, to which *Evangelii Gaudium* too is directed, namely in the sense of a structural "preliminary decision."

1.

The premises of a preliminary decision in *Evangelii Gaudium*

In ch. 4 of *Evangelii Gaudium*, which discusses the social dimension of evangelization, subsection III on "The Common Good and Peace in Society" contains four premises that establish a preliminary decision of this kind:

⁴ On this, see M. Sievernich, "Ehe und Familie im interkulturellen Aufbruch? Zur römischen Bischofssynode 2015," in: C. Schönborn (ed.), *Berufung und Sendung der Familie: Die zentralen Texte der Bischofssynode*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2015, 22-44, at 24.

⁵ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel* (November 24, 2013; hereafter: EG).

⁶ This could even be pursued further on the individual level, if one follows the reflections by Cardinal Schönborn, whom the Pope himself has called an authentic interpreter of his Exhortation. With regard to the question of participation in the life of the Church in the future, it will always be "the obligation of the pastors to find a path that corresponds to the truth of the faith and to the life of the persons whom they accompany – without being able to explain to everyone why these persons take one particular decision rather than another. This too belongs to the 'sphere of confidence' that is created by the *forum internum*" (C. Schönborn, "Einleitung," in Idem [ed.], *Berufung und Sendung* [n. 4 above], 7-21, at 16).

Time is greater than space.⁷

Unity prevails over conflict.

Realities are more important than ideas.

The whole is greater than the part.

In the present essay, we can offer a detailed interpretation only of the first of these principles. The Pope writes: “A constant tension exists between fullness and limitation. Fullness evokes the desire for complete possession, while limitation is a wall set before us. Broadly speaking, ‘time’ has to do with fullness as an expression of the horizon which constantly opens before us, while each individual moment has to do with limitation as an expression of enclosure. People live poised between each individual moment and the greater, brighter horizon of the utopian future as the final cause which draws us to itself. Here we see a first principle for progress in building a people: time is greater than space” (EG 222).

This is the context for many central affirmations in *Evangelii Gaudium* and *Amoris Laetitia* that emphasize the importance of “getting ahead step by step,” of growth, of the dynamic of “setting out,” of ripening and of the estimated time this requires – in short, the importance of time. *Evangelii Gaudium* quotes Peter Faber, whom Pope Francis canonized: “Time is God’s

⁷ Francis explains this principle as follows: “This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time. One of the faults which we occasionally observe in sociopolitical activity is that spaces and power are preferred to time and processes. Giving priority to space means madly attempting to keep everything together in the present, trying to possess all the spaces of power and of self-assertion; it is to crystallize processes and presume to hold them back. Giving priority to time means being concerned about *initiating processes rather than possessing spaces*. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity. Sometimes I wonder if there are people in today’s world who are really concerned about generating processes of people-building, as opposed to obtaining immediate results which yield easy, quick short-term political gains, but do not enhance human fullness. History will perhaps judge the latter with the criterion set forth by Romano Guardini: ‘The only measure for properly evaluating an age is to ask to what extent it fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful human existence, in accordance with the peculiar character and the capacities of that age.’ This criterion also applies to evangelization, which calls for attention to the bigger picture, openness to suitable processes and concern for the long run. The Lord himself, during his earthly life, often warned his disciples that there were things they could not yet understand and that they would have to await the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 16:12-13). The parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. Mt 13:24-30) graphically illustrates an important aspect of evangelization: the enemy can intrude upon the kingdom and sow harm, but ultimately he is defeated by the goodness of the wheat” (EG 223-225; the quotation in EG 223 is from R. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit: Ein Versuch zur Orientierung*, Würzburg: Werkbund-Verlag, 1950, 31). On the interpretation of the programmatic phrase “initiating processes rather than possessing spaces,” see J. Sautermeister, “‘Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen ...’: Anmerkung einer moral-psychologischen Relecture des nachsynodalen Apostolischen Schreibens *Amoris Laetitia*,” in: *INTAMS Review* 22 (2016), 169-181.

messenger” (see EG 171). In very general terms, the principle that “time is greater than space” means that “movement,” or better: “being [*Sein*] that is moved,” “being [*Sein*] in becoming,” acquires a higher significance, what we might call an “ethical-substantial” significance vis-à-vis a “being” [*Wesen*] that is thought of abstractly. This, however, cannot be postulated of every movement *qua* movement, but only of a movement that is qualified in one particular way. It can be postulated only of a movement in the sense of a higher development that is sustained by a growing closer to God” (EG 170). Here, therefore, “graduality” means not a mere moving forward (*à la* the simplification of a slogan like “the path is the goal”). It involves “discrete” steps, steps that are determined and then taken on the basis of an accompanying “discernment.” When a step forwards is taken in such a context, there applies an affirmation that Pope Francis emphasized in *Evangelii Gaudium* and took up again in *Amoris Laetitia*: “A small step, in the midst of great human limitations, can be more pleasing to God than a life which appears outwardly in order but moves through the day without confronting great difficulties. Everyone needs to be touched by the comfort and attraction of God’s saving love, which is mysteriously at work in each person, above and beyond their faults and failings” (EG 44, cf. AL 305).⁸

The principle that “time is greater than space” thus indubitably constitutes an important premise, in the sense that it signifies a preliminary decision about how one tackles questions and problems; and this is because space and time are the elementary forms of perception. This, however, does not sufficiently define the theological-ethical significance of this principle. Here, it could be helpful to look more closely at the theological tradition that helps us to understand better this entire approach.

2.

In the Franciscan tradition –

On Bonaventure’s theological understanding of time

⁸ The path of an accompanying discernment is also the decisive path of the formation of conscience. It is not a question of replacing the conscience, but of empowering it. Here the Pope admits, with regard to ecclesial praxis: “We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations, and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations. We have been called to form consciences, not to replace them” (AL 37).

The identification of an adequate framework for understanding the principle that “time is greater than space” can only take the form of a forensic inquiry that relies on individual clues and locates these within a larger theological tradition. The quotation from Romano Guardini’s *Vom Ende der Neuzeit* in EG 224 takes us further, if we read it in the broader context of this book. Guardini is criticizing here an image of the Middle Ages that was delineated at the beginning of the “Modern Period.” This sees the Middle Ages as an epoch that had not yet attained the full and genuine stage of self-reflexivity. If we take as our standard “the extent to which [an age] fosters the development and attainment of a full and authentically meaningful human experience,” we see that this “occurred in the Middle Ages in a manner that gives it a place among the loftiest ages of history.”⁹ Nothing could be further from Guardini than the idea of returning to the cosmologically determined worldview of the Middle Ages and its understanding of human existence;¹⁰ nevertheless, the exciting synthesis between faith and reason allowed the Middle Ages to elaborate an understanding of the person that has become a central foundation of the culture and the cultural tradition of the modern era.¹¹

Guardini sees the dishonesty of the modern era, which ended at the latest with the Second World War, as lying in its desire to make use of the human and cultural achievements of Christianity without a genuine decision in favor of revelation, which is the guarantor of these achievements. The situation after the close of the modern era differs from that of the Middle Ages through its entering into the “seriousness of the person”¹² through “decision, fidelity, and overcoming.”¹³ In Guardini’s eyes, this is the reason why “the practical-existential element” in the Christian dogma must “come into its own” alongside the theoretical element.¹⁴ He goes on: “I surely do not need to say that this does not mean a ‘modernization’ of any kind; neither the content nor the validity is weakened. On the contrary, the character of absoluteness, the unconditional quality of the affirmation and of the demand, is emphasized more strongly. But I assume that, in this absoluteness, the definition of existence and the orientation of conduct will be especially tangible.”¹⁵ Francis could have put it in the same way, precisely with regard to the personal seriousness that is involved in getting

⁹ R. Guardini, *Das Ende der Neuzeit*, 31 (first part quoted from EG 224).

¹⁰ On this, see *ibid.*, 21ff.

¹¹ On this, see *ibid.*, 108f.

¹² *Ibid.*, 112.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 115f.

married. After the “end of the modern era,” this seriousness demands, at any rate more clearly than in the past, the decision of faith for Christ as mediator and redeemer.

With reference to the link between the decision of faith and the reality of redemption, Guardini can draw on his early studies of the doctrine of redemption in the Franciscan theologian Bonaventure (1221-1274).¹⁶ Already in this fundamental monograph, which has not lost its importance, Guardini points out that while redemption is “an objective work of God, pure grace, completely independent of the human being,” on the one hand, “according to Bonaventure,” on the other hand, “the entire work of redemption confronts the human being from the outset with the demand that one take a decision.”¹⁷ The doctrine of satisfaction or sacrifice is indeed “the logical foundation of [Bonaventure’s] image of redemption, but that is not all: on this basis, he presents the work of Christ as teaching, leadership, education, and the re-establishing of the divine fellowship of life in all its rich variety.”¹⁸ This specific typical characteristic of Bonaventure’s soteriology brings Guardini to a question that still lies open for him: “from what presuppositions in the structure of being [*Sein*] and of thinking is it derived”?¹⁹

No less a scholar than Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI took up this question in his study of Bonaventure’s understanding of revelation and his theology of history.²⁰ At the end of his postdoctoral thesis, *Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura*, published in 1959, Ratzinger discusses the so-called “anti-Aristotelianism” of Bonaventure, which is directed ultimately against a philosophical thinking that remains within the boundaries of reason alone, and therefore cannot last – since it is the way of life of Saint Francis of Assisi that will be victorious, and this “will one day be the universal way of life of the Church.”²¹ However, this faith does not renounce insight; in Bonaventure’s work, it is based on the knowledge of the links between time and being [*Sein*] in the theology of creation. These links have broken open the limitations of the Aristotelian concept of time, which is oriented to space, and

¹⁶ See R. Guardini, *Die Lehre des Heil: Bonaventura von der Erlösung. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und zum System der Erlösungslehre*, Düsseldorf: L. Schwann Verlag, 1921.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 190f.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

²⁰ See J. Ratzinger, “Offenbarung und Heilsgeschichte nach der Lehre des heiligen Bonaventura,” in: *Idem, Gesammelte Schriften*, Vol. 2: *Offenbarungsverständnis und Geschichtstheologie Bonaventuras*, Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 2009, 51-417; J. Ratzinger, “Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura,” *ibid.*, 419-646.

²¹ J. Ratzinger, “Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura,” 644.

have indeed “abolished” these limitations in view of the Christ event as the “midpoint of time.”

Florian Kolbinger’s groundbreaking study of Bonaventure’s understanding of time and its contribution to the thirteenth-century discourse about *tempus* and *aevum* has brought further clarity here.²² His exposition can be read as a background commentary to the principle that “time is greater than space.”

For Bonaventure, time is a universal, living structural order that is equiprimordial with all entities of every kind. He speaks of a *concreata habitudo*. This means that time is not a substance in the sense of an autonomous being [*Wesen*], but is a “structure inherent to created being [*Sein*].”²³ Its creative character can be understood as a dynamic synthesis that receives its momentum from the boundary relationship between the uncreated and the created (that is to say, everything that has a beginning). In this way, Bonaventure sees time as an “objective” reality, not as a purely “subjective” reality, as a measurement of every duration, irrespective of whether this duration has only a beginning, but no end – for Bonaventure, this is a characteristic of the life of spiritual beings, more precisely, of the angels – or whether the duration is restricted to the datable amount of movement in accordance with a “before” and an “after.” This directs our attention to the classic Aristotelian definition of time.²⁴

Bonaventure regards this as the narrowest definition of time, since it is related to the physical world.²⁵ Accordingly, space and movement in space are the fundamental, determinative perspective. Space is to be understood here as a vessel in which an entity is completely contained; and this means that time can be understood only as an accident of local movement, of movement in space. In other words, the continuous character of time as an amount of movement in accordance with a “before” and an “after” is merely a symptom of being encompassed and contained by or in space. Within this framework, Bonaventure accepts the Aristotelian definition of time, but he calls it a “restricted definition,” a *coarctata temporis acceptio*.²⁶

²² F. Kolbinger, *Zeit und Ewigkeit: Philosophisch-theologische Beiträge Bonaventuras zum Diskurs des 13. Jahrhunderts um tempus und aevum*, Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2014 (Veröffentlichungen des Grabmann-Institutes zur Erforschung der mittelalterlichen Theologie und Philosophie, 55).

²³ *Ibid.*, 290.

²⁴ See Aristotle, *Physics* IV 11, 219 b 2.

²⁵ On this, see F. Kolbinger, *Zeit und Ewigkeit*, 203.

²⁶ On this, see *ibid.*, 178.

The perspective of creation makes it impossible for a theological understanding to accept this restriction. In his exposition of the “In the beginning” of the biblical creation narrative (Gen 1:1), Bonaventure makes it clear that time has a special dignity because it belongs, together with heaven, angels, and the *materia prima*, to the *quattuor prima creata*, the “four first-created things.”²⁷ Time functions thus both as a measure for the abiding being [*Sein*] of the spiritual beings – it is the *aevum*, a permanence that has a beginning but no end – and as a measure for the being [*Sein*] that is subject to mutability. It is the “flowing now” that we call *tempus*, time in the “natural” sense. In Bonaventure’s remarkable theological fundamental ontology, *tempus* and *aevum* cannot simply be played off against each other, because both have a common origin in the first act of creation, and are therefore encompassed by the *aeternitas* of God. Everything that is aeviternal is *per se* meant for permanence; and only that which possesses a perfection, or at least has a share in perfection (and is thus perfectible), can belong to the aeviternal. Although the abiding being [*Sein*] has a higher degree of dignity than the temporal being [*Sein*], the potentiality that is specific to the aeviternal being [*Sein*] means that it possesses a striving for *perfectio*, a veritable “hunger” that can be satisfied only by God himself.²⁸ Temporality is thus not a deficit, but the expression of an eager waiting for a perfecting that can come only from God. This is also true *e contra* of the sphere of the temporal. With the creation of the world, the “time-space” of history opens up for a finite being [*Wesen*] of freedom such as the human being, who has a share both in *aevum* and in *tempus*. This aeviternal-temporal structure finds expression in the “tension between abiding being [*Sein*] and necessary becoming [*Werden*].”²⁹

In the Aristotelian perspective, time can never possess such a dignity, since it is regarded rather as the cause of decay.³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI has presented clearly the significance of this “re-evaluation” with its Christian inspiration: “When we apply this to the problem of history, this means that history, which belongs to the sphere of accidental finitude, is capable only of an accidental ordering and is not a part of that truly ordered causal cosmos that goes in a different direction. This idea is completely isomorphic with the well-known ancient (and partly also scholastic) concept of history. History is the realm of the contingent. It is not truly capable of being the object of scientific

²⁷ On this, see *ibid.*, 198.

²⁸ On this, see *ibid.*, 340f.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 342.

³⁰ On this, see *ibid.*, 341.

work – and not only because the mystery of human freedom is at work in it, but also because it belongs to the causal cosmos of the things in the world, which is ordered only in an accidental manner. Bonaventure recognizes acutely that this picture of history is incompatible with the Christian understanding of history. He demands an ordering in the horizontal line of the events in the world and their sequence too. He must do this, because he has in view a completely different form of world-history: he sees the history of the world as structured in *egressus* and *regressus*, and Christ stands in the midpoint of both of these.”³¹ The principle that “time is greater than space” thus contains a perspective on the theology of history in which time is co-created “in the beginning” through the uncreated Word (the *verbum increatum*) together with heaven, angels, and the “first matter,” but reaches its own true fullness in the incarnation of the Word (the *verbum incarnatum*). The Christ event is not (as in the Augustinian schema of history) linked to the end of the world, but to its “midpoint,” that is to say, to its fullness “in the sense of the ‘fulfillment of the mysteries of the world.’ This means that it is only now that time reaches its full measure and its full efficacy, an efficacy that (because of the fall of the human being) consists in healing.”³²

The positing of the principle that “time is greater than space” thus expresses a change in the basic forms of perception, namely, space and time. This change not only has an effect on specific theologies, such as the theological view of marriage and the family, but also influences fundamental ethical concepts and modes of ethical evaluation.³³ When, therefore, Bonaventure shifts *aevum* and *tempus* onto the side of the *creata* and contrasts this with the sphere of the eternal, that is, God’s *aeternitas*, he has made the correct basic decision, despite many unclarities in the conceptual elaboration. No less a figure than his theological colleague Thomas Aquinas, following the Aristotelian guidelines, which he retained, linked the *aevum* to *aeternitas*.³⁴ Bonaventure issued a clear warning against the dangers that this momentous preliminary decision entailed precisely for the theological perspective.³⁵ This does not make obsolete

³¹ J. Ratzinger, “Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura,” 618f.

³² F. Kolbinger, *Zeit und Ewigkeit*, 372.

³³ This applies especially to the doctrine of the “sources of the moral quality” of an action, or to the question of what the “source” of morality actually means; on this, see G. Höver, *Sittlich handeln im Medium der Zeit: Ansätze zur handlungstheoretischen Neuorientierung der Moralthologie*, Würzburg: Echter, 1988.

³⁴ On this, see F. Kolbinger, *Zeit und Ewigkeit*, 203.

³⁵ J. Ratzinger writes that Bonaventure “does not include Aquinas among the Aristotelians whom he is combating; there are no texts that seriously support such an assertion. But he does see in Thomas the danger of an excessive trust in Aristotle, and he believes that he must utter a grave warning [...]. For this reason, our saint may have regarded precisely the concession Thomas makes to Aristotle in such a decisive question as that of the eternity of the world as extremely suspicious” (“Die Geschichtstheologie des heiligen Bonaventura,” 615f.). If, however, we follow the groundbreaking study by P. Porro, *Forme e modelli di durata nel pensiero medievale: L’AEVUM, il tempo discreto, la categoria ‘quando,’* Leuven: Leuven University Press, 1996 (Ancient and

theological-ethical approaches that are indebted to the Aristotelian tradition, but it is possible that the *coarctata temporis acceptio* that they suppose puts limits on their validity, and that it is not permissible to bring them implicitly into a contraposition to a theological concept of time, or of time, creation, and redemption.

Irrespective of one's opinion of Bonaventure's theology of time and history, and regardless of other conceptions of space and time as forms of perception, this is the background that allows us to see the deeper theological-ethical meaning of the principle that "time is greater than space" – a principle that does not stand on its own in *Evangelii gaudium*, but is accompanied by three other specific principles. If this is the case, it must be possible to find in *Amoris Laetitia* something of this tension between *aevum* and *tempus* and the inadequacy of a definition of time that is merely related to space and blanks out the theological background. I shall now briefly demonstrate that this is indeed the case, by means of a few indications that however require a further elaboration.

3.

***Discretio personalis* – allowing the person to be seen**

The central concern of Pope Francis is to lead people to Christ, who is the healing fullness of time, with the aid of spiritual accompaniment and discernment. In *Amoris Laetitia*, the remarks about "pastoral discernment" refer above all to those who are in situations "that fall short of what the Lord demands of us" (AL 6), and especially to "accompanying, discerning, and integrating weakness," which is the theme of ch. 8.³⁶ Accompaniment and discernment apply not only to difficult or complex situations in people's lives, but in general

Medieval Philosophy de Wulf-Mansion Centre Series I, 16), and regard the little tractate *De instantibus* as a text that goes back to the late Thomas himself, we must say that, by this point at the latest – as the criticism of Aristotle in that text clearly demonstrates – Thomas has revised his earlier position on *aevum* and *tempus*. This is also the conclusion reached by the special investigation by M. Janseen, *Vom Augenblick: Geistesgeschichtliche Untersuchungen unter besonderer Berücksichtigung des Opusculums 'De instantibus'*, Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2008.

³⁶ On this, see M. Sievernich, "Von der Kunst persönlicher und pastoraler 'Unterscheidung' im Kontext der Familie," in: *Theologische Quartalschrift* 196 (206), 355-370; on the place of the question of discernment in the context of a Christian existential ethics, see J. Brantl, *Entscheidung durch Unterscheidung: Existenzialethik als inneres Moment einer medizinischen Ethik in christlicher Perspektive*, Münster: LIT Verlag, 2007 (Studien der Moralthologie, 37).

to all processes of growing “ever closer to God” (EG 170). Francis has already spelt this out in detail in ch. 3 of *Evangelii Gaudium* on the proclamation of the Gospel, where he speaks of the necessity of initiating all the members of the Church into this “‘art of accompaniment’ which teaches us to remove our sandals before the sacred ground of the other (cf. Ex 3:5)” (EG 169). It is only in this attitude that we can perceive the “realism of the Gospel.” The Pope believes that the complex logic of this realism has been largely underestimated in theory and in praxis.³⁷

Against the background of Bonaventure’s theology, one could understand this discernment as a *discretio personalis*,³⁸ that is to say, as a way of allowing the person to be seen. This *discretio personalis*, which for Bonaventure is closely related to the individual substance, is more exacting, since it requires us to discern the very varied situations not only on the temporal level (that is, on the level of “world time”). This is set out in detail in ch. 2 of *Amoris Laetitia* (“The experiences and challenges of families”) and in many other passages of the Exhortation. One must also bear in mind that the human being in his or her personal-substantial forms of life such as marriage and the family is a being who shares both in the abiding and in the mutable, both in the aeviternal and in the temporal. Both of these together constitute his or her temporality.

³⁷ In his address at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Rome on June 16, 2016, Francis underlines the importance of this principle for understanding the Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* as a whole. God’s demand to Moses: “Take off your shoes, for the place where you are standing is holy ground” (Ex 3:5), tells us the attitude that is required when one takes up the theme of the family and marriage. We must give a face to all the discussions, decisions, and documents – in other words, we must link these to the concrete faces of the many families whom the individual bearers of responsibility see before them; and we must unwearingly look for the presence of God in these faces. It is this encounter with God in the face of the other that challenges us “not to consider anything or anyone lost, but to see, to renew the hope of knowing that God continues to act in our families. It challenges us not to abandon anyone for not being up to what is asked of him or her. This compels us to go beyond the declaration of principles” and to go into the districts of the city in order reach even the families who have no contact with the Church. “As artisans, setting ourselves to mold God’s dream in this reality, something that can be done only by people of faith, those who do not close access to the action of the Spirit, and who get their hands dirty. Reflecting on the life of our families, as they are and as they are found, asks that we take off our shoes in order to discover God’s presence. This is the first Bible image. Go: there is God, there. God who enlivens, God who lives, God who was crucified ... but he is God.” In the same discourse, the Pope contrasts this first image with a second biblical image, namely, that of the Pharisee who prayed to the Lord and said: “God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector” (Lk 18:11). Francis criticizes the “separatist logic” of this attitude, that is to say, the endeavor (which is also a temptation) to create and maintain one’s own identity by demarcation vis-à-vis others, at the expense of people who live in other situations. We must counter this attitude by the principle that “identity does not depend on separation: identity is strengthened in belonging.” It is only the one who can say, with the tax collector, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner!” that can base his or her identity on belonging to the Lord. It is only in outward appearance that one acquires a realistic view and attitude by means of distance and demarcation. The true realism can be acquired only on the path of “sensitivity” and mercy: this is not just any realism, but “the realism of God. The analyses we make are important, they are necessary and help us to have a healthy realism. But nothing can compare to Gospel realism, which does not stop at describing the various situations, the problems – much less the sins – but which always goes a step further and is able to see an opportunity, a possibility behind every face, every story, every situation.”

³⁸ On this, see F. Kolbinger, *Zeit und Ewigkeit*, 317.

Francis makes it clear, beyond any doubt, that the human being in marriage and the family shares in the abiding being [*Sein*] of the aeviternal. He specifies in his remarks on “Growing in conjugal love” (AL 120-122) that married love, in addition to the characteristics of a good friendship, is oriented of its very nature to exclusivity and to an all-encompassing duration – in other words, to indissolubility. Without the firm intention “to share and shape together the whole of life” (AL 123), it is impossible to enter into and to build up a marriage that could adequately correspond to the demands of truth and truthfulness.³⁹ When Francis also emphasizes that “it is in the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive” and that this “is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person,” he is taking over central ideas of John Paul II’s “theology of the body.”⁴⁰ This goes as far as the affirmation: “The procreative meaning of sexuality, the language of the body, and the signs of love shown throughout married life, all become an ‘uninterrupted continuity of liturgical language’ and ‘conjugal life becomes in a certain sense liturgical’” (AL 215, quoting the General Audience of John Paul II, July 4, 1984, 3 and 6). Similarly, “the ideal of marriage” is not to be understood in the sense of an unattainable goal or an aspiration. Rather, it is the expression of a participation of married reality in the aeviternal – not only in the temporal.

All the human reality that participates in the aeviternal is also a “fragile,” endangered reality. This is because the human being and his world are broken by original sin, and because the aeviternal, the *aevum*, is of its nature “discrete,” that is to say, not necessarily continuous, and hence cannot simply be grasped by means of the Aristotelian concept of time, which is inadequate for this reality. If one attempts to understand more clearly what it means, one comes to see more clearly, in a non-moralizing manner, the ontological meaning of “breakdown” and “fragility” in marriage and the family.⁴¹ With regard to the *discretio spirituum* that is demanded in “pastoral accompaniment and discernment,” one must develop a new or renewed awareness of the specific character of

³⁹ The Pope writes: “Let us be honest and acknowledge that this is the case. Lovers do not see their relationship as merely temporary. Those who marry do not expect their excitement to fade. Those who witness the celebration of a union, however fragile, trust that it will pass the test of time. Children not only want their parents to love one another, but also to be faithful and remain together. These and similar signs show that it is in the very nature of conjugal love to be definitive. The lasting union expressed by the marriage vows is more than a formality or a traditional formula; it is rooted in the natural inclinations of the human person. For believers, it is also a covenant before God that calls for fidelity” (AL 123).

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *The Theology of the Body: Human Love in the Divine Plan*, Boston: Pauline Books, 1997.

⁴¹ On the question of the failure and breakdown of relationships, see J. Sautermeister, “Discernment of Biographies and the Moral Development of Identities: Perspectives of a Christian Approach to Deviance, Failure, and New Beginnings,” in: T. Knieps-Port le Roi and A. Brenninkmeijer-Werhahn (eds.), *Authentic Voices, Discerning Hearts: New Resources for the Church on Marriage and Family*, Zurich: LIT, 2016 (INTAMS Studies on Marriage and Family, 1), 78-95.

“discretely” measured time, which must be understood in this context rather in the sense of a “living structure.”

Against this background, we can also grasp why Francis breaks open the antithesis between “regular” and “irregular” situations that held good to now, and puts the adjective “irregular” in inverted commas (see AL 296-300: “The discernment of ‘irregular’ situations”). Although the Church’s moral teaching, including canon law, draws distinctions between “situations,” it makes a normative distinction between “regular” and “irregular” situations; when the Pope puts the latter word in inverted commas, he necessarily changes the logic of contrariety, of a dichotomy, that underlies the previous teaching, since his formulation avoids positing the irregular as the opposition of the regular. He does not indeed abolish this dichotomy; in a formal sense, it continues to exist. But he reduces it to the level of a subcontrary opposition. An example of a contrary opposition is “black” and “not black”: the two adjectives are mutually exclusive. A contrary opposition contains a dichotomy that is conceived in stronger terms: in the constellation “black” vs. “white,” the white is, as such, further removed from the black than the mere “not black”; but all that is “not black” is not black – it can also be blue, green, red, and so on. In a subcontrary opposition, this antithesis between black and white – including green, red, and so on; in short, the colorful – is weakened, because both of them (the black and the white, green, red, and so on) could be true, or could contain something that is true. This means that the inverted commas avoid understanding the opposition between “regular” and “irregular” in the sense of a contrary opposition, where the two adjectives would be mutually exclusive. But since it is impossible *a priori* to affirm both of them or to deny both of them simultaneously in their truth content in relation to concrete human beings and to their life situations, we must understand the formulation in *Amoris Laetitia* in the sense of a subcontrary opposition. In a subcontrary opposition, the antithesis is highlighted more strongly, but it is not determined *a priori* what is true. In other words, the irregular, just like the regular, could at least contain something that is true to an extent, or a truth; this is not excluded *a priori*.

We cannot go into greater depth here in these logical reflections; but we can already grasp the explosive power that genuinely lies in the use of inverted commas and of other concepts such as “complex,” “inchoate,” and “imperfect.” At the very least, they pose a question to established distinctions in their concrete contents, without of course relativizing the basic ethical distinctions between “good” and “bad,” “right” and “wrong,” without which an objectifiable

ethics free of contradictions would be impossible. At the same time, however, we cannot fail to see that a change of the logic of contradiction affects some of the foundations of the previous norm concept for marriage and the family. For example, the Pope warns directly: “By thinking that everything is black and white, we sometimes close off the way of grace and of growth, and discourage paths of sanctification which give glory to God” (AL 305).⁴² This makes it clear that the principle that “time is greater than space” takes on a moral-theological significance that refers to the level of norm structures and affects the previous teaching about “intrinsically evil actions.” It is not without reason that some have requested further clarification on this point.⁴³

The doctrine in Thomas and Thomism about “intrinsically evil actions”⁴⁴ contains the axiom *bonum ex causa integra, malum ex quocumque defectu*, that is to say, “goodness” and (in this sense) also “regularity” exist only when all the factors that constitute the ethical quality of an action form an integral unity; if even only one element is defective, the consequence is “badness” and (in this sense) also “irregularity.” If one looks more closely at the Aristotelian background, one sees that the theorem is based on the contrary opposition between form and lack (*privatio*, “absence”) as a model for the explanation of movements of change in space.⁴⁵ According to Bonaventure’s conception of time, however, this means that the theorem is based on a *coarctata temporis acceptio*, and this means that the definition of that which is “intrinsically evil” is also affected. It seems that theological reasons lead Pope Francis to refuse to go on accepting this restriction. This does not in the least dispute the necessity of calling oppositions and irregularities by their names, above all in cases of

⁴² He had already emphasized no less clearly in an earlier passage: “The Church possesses a solid body of reflection concerning mitigating factors and situations. Hence it cannot simply be said that all those in any ‘irregular’ situation are living in a state of mortal sin and are deprived of sanctifying grace” (AL 301).

⁴³ See the second of the four *dubia* of Cardinals Brandmüller, Burke, Caffarra, and Meisner (readily available: e.g., <http://catholicism.org/the-five-dubia-of-the-four-cardinals.html>, retrieved 12.10.2017); see also the letter of J. Finnis and G. Grisez to Pope Francis: “The Misuse of *Amoris Laetitia* to Support Errors against the Catholic Faith,” 21.11.2016, <http://www.twotlj.org/OW-MisuseAL.pdf> (retrieved 27.01.2017), esp. 8-10.

⁴⁴ On the interpretation in the Aristotelian context, see S. Herzberg, “Das Lehrstück von den in sich schlechten Handlungen bei Aristoteles,” in: *Theologie und Philosophie* 91 (2016), 196-214; on Thomas’ teaching about the “intrinsically evil actions,” see the remarks by C.J. Scherer, *Die per se schlechten Handlungen in der Summa Theologiae des Thomas von Aquin: Die Bedeutung von Tugend und Gesetz für die Artbestimmung der menschlichen Handlung*, doctoral dissertation at the University of Bonn, 2014 (<http://hss.ulb.unibonn.de/2014/3478/3748.htm>, retrieved 27.01.2017), who convincingly demonstrates that this teaching is restricted to the context of justice, that is to say, to the perspective of the external action and to the relationship to the other.

⁴⁵ On this, see H. Schmitz, *Der Weg der europäischen Philosophie: Eine Gewissenserforschung*, Vol. 2: *Nachantike Philosophie*, Freiburg and Munich: Karl Alber, 2007, 89: “But since all creatures (unlike God) have a passive potency, they are all subject to the contrary opposition; and this is for Aristotle first and foremost the opposition between *habitus* and *privatio* that permeates every contrary opposition.” On the critique of Thomas’ reception of Aristotelian mental figures, see the further remarks, *ibid.*

injustice and unfairness vis-à-vis other persons. But the Pope regards the path that has been taken hitherto as inadequate to cope with the differentness and complexity of the situations in which people stand or live. Here, it appears that the principle that “time is greater than space” requires a further development of teaching and of praxis. In short, the Pope expands the moral consideration (the *consideratio moralis*) with regard to the norm concept beyond the level of the spatially limited forms of perception – the purely “formal” way of looking at things that “waives theological argumentation”⁴⁶ – onto the level of the form of perception that is based on the theology of time. He thereby changes the logic of the oppositions that must be discussed, distinguished, and accompanied, since he does not exclude *a priori* the possibility of a subcontrary opposition. This certainly appears to be possible in ontological-metaphysical terms.

But the question remains open: May the Pope undertake such a transposition and such a change of the norm logic? What can legitimate his action here? Although this is not explicitly stated in *Amoris Laetitia*, my hypothesis is that the legitimation can only be the words of the apostle Paul about the “folly of the cross.” We read at 1 Cor 1:21: “For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.” In a study of 1 Cor 1:21, Helmut Merklein, formerly professor of New Testament at Bonn, has analyzed, from the perspective of the logic of oppositions, the antitheses presented in this passage between “folly” and “wisdom” and between “God” and “the world” with regard to their semantics and to the change that is brought about when Paul speaks of the “folly of the cross.”⁴⁷ On the human level, the opposition between “wisdom” and “folly” is certainly a subcontrary opposition: “the human being cannot simultaneously be not-wise and not-foolish; but as a finite being [*Wesen*], completely unlike God in this regard, he or she can be simultaneously wise (to a limited extent) and foolish (to a limited extent).”⁴⁸ It is, however, obvious that the human being tends to establish his or her insight and organizational capacities on this level, and to come to know God according to the criteria of human wisdom. This means that to speak of “regular” vs. “[so-called] ‘irregular’” situations would be completely misunderstood in hermeneutical terms, if we failed to understand the theological criteria on the basis of the crucified Christ, who is the midpoint and fullness of time, and in whom God

⁴⁶ It is precisely this way of looking at things that the four cardinals want to find in the response to their *dubia*.

⁴⁷ See H. Merklein, “Die Weisheit Gottes und die Weisheit der Welt (1. Kor 1,21),” in: Idem, *Studien zu Jesus und Paulus*, Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987, 376-384.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

addresses the human being salvifically. It is on the basis of “the folly of what we preach” that God in his mercy gives “time” and makes possible on the human level a spiritual discernment according to the criterion of faith, a discernment that can do better justice to the individual in his or her person. This path, to which *Amoris Laetitia* opens a door, must be gradually discovered and identified in a process of open discussion. It is beyond question that a marriage that has been entered into in full faith and consummated cannot be dissolved, because of its sacramentality and of the characteristics of co-eternity and exteriority that are essentially linked to this sacramentality; the Church does not have the power to dissolve it, and the Pope neither can nor will change this doctrine of faith. But Bonaventure’s theology of creation and redemption, in harmony with a deeper theology of the family, can lead to an understanding of the sacramentality of marriage that has a better foundation, an understanding that (in Guardini’s terms) allows “the seriousness of the person” to emerge into the light through “decision, fidelity, and overcoming.”⁴⁹

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⁴⁹ [English translation: Brian McNeil.]