'A Lantern On the Way': Pope Francis' Signposts for Ecclesial Ethics

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Abstract

Pope Francis' way of doing ecclesial ethics is not easy to understand at first glance. It is often unconventional and does not meet the expectations of the faithful who do not wish to see changes in the church, nor does it satisfy those who want rapid change. But if we look more closely at how the Pope understands the church, his approach to ecclesial ethics seems to derive naturally from that. The following contribution aims to show how Pope Francis' ecclesiology determines his approach to ecclesial ethics. To this end, it will (1) summarize important characteristics of his ecclesiology: the *sensus fidelium* and synodality; its orientation towards pastoral ministry, the focus on unity in plurality and its process-orientation. From there, it will show which cornerstones for ecclesial ethics can be derived from this ecclesial perspective, namely (2) with respect to formal characteristics and (3) with regard to its content.

Keywords

ecclesial ethics – Pope Francis – synodality – instinct of the faithful (*sensus fidei fidelium*) – processes – reception – hierarchy of truths – conscience

Writing about Pope Francis' ecclesial ethics is a challenge on several levels. First, there are numerous publications on his ecclesiology and a few on his understanding of moral theology, but very little on what an ecclesial ethics might look like, perhaps because ethical questions are mostly addressed by

Pope Francis in the service of pastoral ministry.¹ Secondly, the question of an ecclesial ethics from a systematic-theological point of view is linked to fundamental moral questions of epistemological criticism which require their own investigations with regard to Pope Francis, but which must be left out of the scope of this contribution.² Thirdly, it must be asked whether a definition of a 'system of ecclesial ethics' would correspond at all to the Pope's wish, who, after all, prefers the dynamics of processes to a rigid system, is 'a man of encounter and practice'³ and thus considers the action of the Church to be more important than reflecting on an abstract idea (cf. EG 233).⁴ The following explanations are therefore intended as signposts for a further reflection on ecclesial ethics, by no means as a review of a path that has already been followed to its end. The signposts originate from Pope Francis' ecclesiological vision and are directed towards an ecclesial ethic.

Both the metaphor of the journey and the observation of the unfinished fit in very well with Pope Francis' way of thinking, which, as Cardinal Kasper notes, is influenced by the national epic Martín Fierro (1872), which originated in Argentinean Romanticism. As Archbishop of Buenos Aires, J. M. Bergoglio used the symbolic message of the epic poem composed by José Hernández to illustrate to move forward as a people towards a society that is just, 'a world which leaves even the least its dignity and opportunities for personal development'.⁵ By analogy, the Church is a 'pilgrim and evangelising people', that

- 1 Cf. S. Müller, 'Untying the Gordian Knot: On the Strengthening of Moral Theology by *Amoris laetitia*', *Marriage, Family and Spirituality* 27 (2021), pp. 49–70, at pp. 69–70. I would like to thank Megan Hunt for her bibliographical help and Mirjam K. Salfinger for her precious exchange on the structure and possible outcomes of this contribution, as well as her support in research, and my colleagues G. Marschütz, G. Prüller-Jagenteufel and Peter Sedgwick for references and encouraging remarks.
- 2 It is impossible to offer here a bibliographical overview on the relevant topics. A still valuable account of relevant moral theological positions developed during the first twenty years after Vatican II is offered by J. Schuster, *Ethos und kirchliches Lehramt. Zur Kompetenz des Lehramtes in Fragen der natürlichen Sittlichkeit* (Frankfurt a. M.: Josef Knecht, 1984), chapter IV, pp. 303–380.
- 3 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe. Theologische Wurzeln und pastorale Perspektiven* (Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2015), p. 31.
- 4 Pope Francis, 'Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html (accessed on December 15, 2020) (referred to as EG). Cf. *Volk Gottes. Entstehung, Rezeption und Aktualität einer ekklesiologischen Leitmetapher* (Würzburg: Echter, 2018), pp. 492–493.
- 5 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 28. Cf. *Papst Franziskus, Mein leben, mein Weg. El Jesuita. Gespräche mit Jorge Mario Bergoglio von Sergio Rubin und Francesca Ambrogetti* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2013), pp. 184–213, at p. 202.

is, 'much more than an organic and hierarchical institution' (EG 111),⁶ whose action is directed towards improving the living conditions of people in the existing society so that all can live in dignity.

This commitment of the Pope to the well-being of people is rooted in the idea that the implementation of the Gospel in life leads to a true culture. Therefore, evangelisation means 'shaping culture in the way of God'.⁷ According to L. Gera, one of the Pope's teachers, theology and pastoral ministry are 'a spiritual practice in the broad sense', but they are also 'at the service of humanisation and a political practice in the sense of the option for the poor'.⁸ The church is thus not concerned with a power-oriented (re)conquest of a world that has become secular, nor is it bound up with the idea that the church simply paternalistically offers a ready-made solution to all questions that only needs to be implemented. Rather, the Gospel is the light for the path that people must follow in community.⁹ With reference to a formulation in the encyclical *Lumen fidei* no. 57, W. Kasper puts the Pope's vision into a memorable image:

In his contextual theology, he wants to illuminate the situation of the Church and Christians in the contemporary world from the Gospel. In this, the Christian faith is not an ideology that wants to explain everything; it is not to be compared to a floodlight that illuminates the whole trajectory of our lives. Rather, it is like a lantern that illuminates us on the path of life to the extent that we ourselves progress. It is an ever-surprising message of joy that can never be exhausted.¹⁰

Francis shows a sober-realistic approach to reality, whose roots have been traced back to Romano Guardini¹¹ and liberation theology,¹² but the Pope

6 Cf. S. Scheingraber, *Aufbruch zu einer 'verbeulten Kirche'. Zur Ekklesiologie von Papst Franziskus* (Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 2019), p. 79.

7 G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, p. 493.

8 M. Eckholt, "... bei mir wächst die Theologie aus der Pastoral". Lucio Gera – ein "Lehrer in Theologie" von Papst Franziskus, *Stimmen der Zeit* 3 (2014), pp. 157–172, at p. 170.

9 Pope Francis uses also the picture of a bright beacon when he explains the 'primacy of grace', by which he expresses that every good human initiative originates in God's action (cf. EG 112).

10 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, pp. 23–33.

11 Cf. R. Guardini, *Der Gegensatz. Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1925). Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, pp. 31–32.

12 G. Mannion, 'Francis's Ecclesiological Revolution. A New Way of Being Church, a New Way of Being Pope', in G. Mannion (ed.), *Pope Francis and the Future of Catholicism. Evangelii Gaudium and the Papal Agenda* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2017), pp. 93–122, at p. 121.

fundamentally regards the multicultural world as richness.¹³ To its complexity, he replies – thereby following his theological references L. Gera and R. Tello – that the Magisterium cannot respond with a closed pastoral and ethical system, but must be content to formulate guiding ideas.¹⁴

This article aims to show how Pope Francis' ecclesiology determines his approach to ecclesial ethics. To this end, I will (1) summarize important characteristics of his ecclesiology: the *sensus fidelium* and synodality; its orientation towards pastoral ministry, the focus on unity in plurality and its process-orientation. From there, I will show which cornerstones for ecclesial ethics can be derived from this ecclesial perspective, namely (2) with respect to formal characteristics and (3) with regard to its content.

1 Elements of Pope Francis' Ecclesiology that Lead the Way

The ideas of the ethical thinking and acting of the Church are closely related to the idea of what the Church is. Current studies show that the Pope's ecclesiology is primarily shaped by two sources, which are, however, not independent of each other: on the one hand by Vatican II, and on the other by the Argentinian theology of the people (Teología del Pueblo). 'Theology of the people' is a form of liberation theology with a strong emphasis on popular piety, represented by Argentinian theologians such as Lucio Gera, Rafael Tello, Juan Carlos Scannone and Jorge Mario Bergoglio himself.¹⁵ It has European origins, insofar as it is influenced by the ideas of German Romanticism, among others through L. Gera.¹⁶ Although the theology of the people was first acknowledged as an independent form of liberation theology in Europe in the 1970s by P. Hünermann and K. Lehmann, it has been more widely received in Europe only since J. M. Bergoglio's election as Pope.¹⁷ This delayed reception is not surprising, since, as H. Schelkshorn rightly remarks, the 'concept of the "people" ... is, as it were, occupied in Europe by fascism. Popular piety, on the

13 Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 31.

14 Cf. G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, p. 490.

15 Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, pp. 26–27.

16 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 29. For a concise presentation of Gera's theological approach cf. L. Gera, 'Pueblo, Religión del Pueblo e Iglesia', *Teología: revista de la Facultad de Teología de la Pontificia Universidad Católica Argentina* 27–28 (1976), pp. 99–123.

17 C. M. Galli, 'Die Ekklesiologie von Papst Franziskus. Die Gestalt des Volkes Gottes in missionarischer Konversion', in: K. Appel, J. H. Deibl (eds), *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe. Das theologische Programm von Papst Franziskus* (Freiburg i. Br., 2016), pp. 39–56, at p. 42.

other hand, is widely regarded in Europe as a remnant of Christianity resistant to enlightenment ...'.¹⁸ In contrast, in Latin American theology of the people, 'people' is 'on the one hand the collective subject of a common historical experience, a common lifestyle, a common culture' and on the other hand means 'a certain class', namely the underprivileged, who in Latin America have preserved both 'the common cultural memory' and a deep religiosity.¹⁹ Therefore, in Argentina's liberation theology, the concepts of people, culture and poverty are inseparable.

1.1 *The Cultural Imprint of God's People in Argentinean 'Theology of the People'*

In the theology of the people, people is not a purely socio-political, but always also a salvation-historical quantity. God's work of salvation consists above all in founding a people, the people of God, the Church. This people of God does not remain abstract, but becomes concrete in each individual people, in each nation and culture. The theology of the people, as the Argentinian bishops point out, is a theology for the people and at the same time a theology that comes from the people themselves.²⁰

The culture that unites the people is characterised by a common ethos. According to L. Gera, culture arises from a hierarchy of values and goals that determine the conscience of the people.²¹ The importance of culture is so central that one cannot even imagine a person without this background. In analogy to the famous theological dictum of grace, *gratia supponit naturam* (grace presupposes nature), Pope Francis therefore formulates in *Evangelii Gaudium* 115 *gratia supponit culturam* (grace presupposes culture). This basic idea already shaped the CELAM General Assembly in Aparecida (13–29 May 2007), for the final document of which Jorge Mario Bergoglio was responsible. The theology of the people not only takes seriously the importance of cultures and thus a fundamental pluralism of the expression of Christianity in the Church

18 H. Schelkshorn, 'Capitalism Critique and "Inculturation": *Evangelii Gaudium* in the Context of Latin American Liberation Thought', in K. Appel and J. H. Deibl (eds), *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe*, pp. 71–84, at p. 80.

19 G. Dietlein, 'Teología del Pueblo. Schlüsselstein zum Denken von Papst Franziskus', *Münchener Theologische Zeitschrift* 67 (2016), pp. 54–66, at pp. 58–59.

20 Cf. 'Documento de San Miguel: declaración del Episcopado Argentino Sobre la adaptación a la realidad actual del país, de las conclusiones de la 11 Conferencia General del Episcopado Latinoamericano (Medellín) (1969)', at no. VI, conclusion 5, <https://www.familiasecnacional.org.ar/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/1969-ConclusionesMedellin.pdf> (accessed on January 2, 2020).

21 L. Gera, 'Pueblo, Religión del Pueblo e Iglesia', p. 106.

as an irrevocable basic condition. Moreover, this approach in the Pope's thinking combines with strong theological figures of thought prepared by Vatican II.

1.2 *The Inerrancy of the Sensus Fidei Fidelium in the Theology of Vatican II*

The influence of the Second Vatican Council on the Pope can be seen in the authority he grants to the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the faith instinct of the faithful: 'As part of his mysterious love for humanity, God furnishes the totality of the faithful with an instinct of faith – *sensus fidei* – which helps them to discern what is truly of God. The presence of the Spirit gives Christians a certain conaturality with divine realities, and a wisdom which enables them to grasp those realities intuitively...' (EG 119).²² The idea of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, rediscovered by J. H. Newman and A. Rosmini in the nineteenth century, had been taken up by the Second Vatican Council, especially in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, when it stated that the People of God were inerrant in their practised faith (*in credendo*) (cf. LG 12; EG 119, 126).²³ The Council contrasted this inerrancy of the People of God in faith with the inerrancy of bishops and the Roman Pontiff in doctrine.²⁴ With Pope Francis, the necessary connection between both elements moves into the centre of attention,²⁵ because under the premise of the realisation of the faith in the people, these two instances can no longer be determined hierarchically in relation to each other or detached from each other. The inculturated faith of the people of God constitutes the basis (and thus also a limit) of the Church's teaching. The Pope sees both (*fides quae* and *fides qua*) as different modes when he assigns the more abstract and systematised description of faith to the Magisterium and the concretion of faith in life to the faithful.²⁶

The elementary importance of the *sensus fidelium* can therefore not only be traced back to its pedagogical significance, which lies in the fact that the

22 Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church'. *Theological Studies* 78 (2017), pp. 299–325, at p. 311.

23 There are formal requirements for its infallibility, cf. LG 25; cf. J. Schmiedl, 'Synodalität als Stil katholischer Ekklesiologie', *ET Studies. Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* 11/2 (2020), pp. 309–317, at p. 314. Dogmatic Constitution on the Church Lumen Gentium (21.11.1964), http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html (accessed on December 30, 2020).

24 Cf. G. Dietlein, 'Teología del Pueblo', p. 58.

25 Plenty of studies elaborate this topic. Cf. e.g. W. Beinert, 'Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen in Theologie- und Dogmengeschichte – Ein Überblick', in: D. Wiederkehr (ed), *Der Glaubenssinn des Gottesvolkes – Konkurrent oder Partner des Lehramtes?* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1994), pp. 66–131, at pp. 102–103.

26 Cf. G. Dietlein, 'Teología del Pueblo', p. 60.

Church, in order to teach and preach, must speak the language of the people and understand their concerns.²⁷ Listening to the *sensus fidelium* also proves to be theologically necessary, since in the Catholic tradition it is a *locus theologicus*,²⁸ that is, a source of faith or, in the formulation of O. Rush, 'a place where the revealing God can be heard speaking to the church today'.²⁹ There is a sacramental justification for this, for the community of all the baptised is united to Jesus Christ through baptism and thus shares in the universal priesthood of Jesus Christ as well as the office of prophet and king (cf. LG 10).³⁰ Furthermore, Cardinal Kasper sees a mystical foundation in Pope Francis: Listening to the individual faithful, especially the poor, is more than just approaching people, because it can become an encounter with Christ.³¹ Borrowing the words of J. B. Metz, W. Kasper describes this attitude as a 'mysticism of open eyes', 'which becomes a mysticism of helping hands'.³²

This comprehensive meaning of the *sensus fidelium* has consequences for the communication processes in the Church. The Pope has made the concern to know the opinion of the faithful part of his agenda and for this reason he commissioned a survey in preparation for the Synod on the Family (2014–2015).³³ In the meantime, the Pope has introduced consultations of this kind as a fixed component of Synods of Bishops in the Constitution *Episcopalis communio*, thereby also giving the *sensus fidei fidelium* formal entry into the process of Synods of Bishops.³⁴

27 Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church', p. 320.

28 M. Eckholt argues that the *sensus fidelium* can be rightly called a *locus theologicus proprius*; cf. M. Eckholt, 'Die Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis. Subjektwerdung im Glauben in Gemeinschaft und theologische Erkenntnis', in A. Slunitschek and T. Bremer (eds), *Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis. Praktische und systematische Theologie im Gespräch* (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 2020), pp. 96–122, at p. 119.

29 O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church', p. 321.

30 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 309–310.

31 Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 63.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 64.

33 Pope Francis, 'Address on the occasion of the Ceremony Commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the Institution of the Synod of Bishops (17 October 2015)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/october/documents/papa-francesco_20151017_50-anniversario-sinodo.html (accessed on December 30, 2020). Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church', p. 312.

34 Pope Francis, 'Apostolic Constitution *Episcopalis communio* (15.9.2018)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_constitutions/documents/papa-francesco_costituzione-ap_20180915_episcopalis-communio.html (accessed on December 31, 2020). Cf. T. Bremer, 'Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis. Ein Problemaufriss', in A. Slunitschek and T. Bremer (eds), *Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis*, pp. 15–31, at pp. 15–16; M. Faggioli, 'From Collegiality to

1.3 *Synodality as a Structure of Ongoing Communication About the Faith*

Synodality therefore does not only mean the upgrading of the College of Bishops vis-à-vis the Pope that took place at Vatican II.³⁵ Drawing on the work of the Council Fathers on the structure of *Lumen Gentium*,³⁶ Pope Francis turns the hierarchical image of the Church, symbolised in the image of a pyramid, on its head:³⁷ 'In this Church, as in an inverted pyramid, the top is located beneath the base ... The faithful people, the college of bishops, the Bishop of Rome: all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit, the "Spirit of truth", in order to know what [the Spirit] 'says to the Churches'.³⁸

By inverting the pyramid, the Pope does not want to level the 'different charisms, ministries and offices, each of which has its own unjustifiable function'.³⁹ Rather, synodality means that ministries and tasks in the Church do not cancel out the equality of all the faithful: 'All must place themselves at the service of the common cause without using their respective tasks to elevate themselves above others'.⁴⁰ This idea, W. Kasper points out, is not new in the Church.⁴¹ Therefore, the Church can only be about a constant listening to one another, because 'the Church is nothing other than the "journeying together" of God's flock along the path of history towards the encounter with Christ the Lord'.⁴² But beyond this communion of the faithful, 'hearing from the whole People of God' means hearing their faith experience, which is inerrant and

Synodality: Promise and Limits of Francis's "Listening Primacy", *Irish Theological Quarterly* 85 (2020), pp. 352–369, at p. 361. On May 21, 2021, Pope Francis confirmed this emphasis by initiating a three-year synodal journey for the world church. Cf. S. Cernuzio, 'Synod of Bishops will continue in the local churches' (21.5.2021), <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2021-05/synod-of-bishops-will-begin-in-the-local-churches.html>.

35 Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church', p. 303–304, 316.

36 Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 305–308.

37 Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 302.

38 Pope Francis, 'Address on the occasion (17 October 2015)'. Cf. EG 171.

39 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 74.

40 J. Schuster, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Gestaltung des päpstlichen Lehramtes? Amoris laetitia und die Synodalität der Kirche', in S. Goertz and C. Witting (eds), *Amoris laetitia – Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie?* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2016), pp. 224–248, at p. 230.

41 This idea was already formulated by J. A. Möhler (1796–1838) and, long before, by Melchior Cano in his 'Locorum theologicorum libri duodecim' (1567). Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 71, with reference to J. A. Möhler, *Die Einheit in der Kirche oder das Prinzip des Katholizismus* (1825), ed. J. R. Geiselermann (Köln/Olten: Jakob Hegner, 1957), p. 237. Regarding Cano, Kasper refers to M. Seckler, *Die schiefen Wände des Lehrhauses. Katholizität als Herausforderung* (Freiburg i. Br./Basel/Wien: Herder, 1988), pp. 79–104.

42 Pope Francis, 'Address on the occasion (17 October 2015)'.

a source of magisterial teaching.⁴³ The inversion of the pyramid therefore is not an expression of personal modesty, but a necessity due to a core belief of Christian faith: 'To set yourself above the People of God is to ignore that the Lord has already come close to His people, anointing them, raising them up.'⁴⁴

1.4 *Pastoral Ministry Trumps Moralism*

However, the inversion of the pyramid also does not mean that the faithful are only to be listened to and learned from. Rather, ministers of the Church should accompany and support the faithful on the common path in their concrete situations. To this end, the Pope recommends the practice of the discernment of spirits handed down in the Jesuit order.⁴⁵ This starts from the biblical message and interprets earthly reality from it. From the Gospel, people gain the strength to shape culture.⁴⁶

What has been explained so far shows that moral elements as well as faith elements are part of the church's confrontation with the concrete conditions of people's lives. The proclamation of the Gospel and 'bringing closer the redeeming power of God's love' are more important than the evaluation of moral and religious duties, because the experience of God's love enables and motivates people to act in accordance with ethical obligations.⁴⁷ This insight is shown concretely in *Amoris laetitia*, where the Pope criticises moralism and instead calls for a loving approach to believers in so-called 'irregular' forms of life (cf. AL 305).

At the same time, this pastoral attitude is itself highly characterised by ethical premises: the dynamics of people's realities and life stories are recognised and people are taken seriously as moral subjects with a concrete biography (cf. AL 261–262). For this reason, J. Sautermeister has emphasised the parallels between the papal liberation theological approach and moral psychology.⁴⁸ The Pope's call for parents to accompany and encourage children on the path of self-empowerment shows that people should direct and determine

43 Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream. The Path to A Better Future* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 2020), at p. 84.

44 Pope Francis, *Let Us Dream*, p. 106.

45 Cf. W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 19.

46 Cf. G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, p. 492.

47 G. Chojnacki, 'Moral Theological Implications of Faith after Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*. *Colloquia Theologica Ottoniana*, no. 1 (2016), pp. 29–42, at p. 33.

48 Cf. J. Sautermeister, "Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen ..." Anmerkungen einer moralpsychologische Relecture des nachsynodalen Apostolischen Schreibens *Amoris Laetitia*, *Intams review* 22 (2016), pp. 169–181, at pp. 170–171. doi: 10.2143/int.22.2.3194499J.

their own actions and thus live up to their dignity as baptised persons. People are to become persons 'who choose with sense and understanding at decisive moments; persons who understand without reservation that their lives and those of their community are in their hands and that this freedom is an immeasurable gift' (AL 262).⁴⁹

As in faith, so also in action, every human being undergoes processes of growth (cf. EG 169–173), which are to be accompanied by the Church 'wisely, patiently and mercifully, step by step'.⁵⁰ This moral-psychological sensitivity of the Pope has its origin in the 'centre of the Christian faith: God's unconditional love and mercy, which urges religious-moral growth', which is why 'demanding ideals and following norms' is no longer sufficient.⁵¹

In the light of the ecclesiological premises described above, however, it is not only a question of a pastoral or moral-psychological basic attitude of the church, but also of consequences for the way church norms are dealt with. Pastoral care and doctrine are interdependent.⁵² In consequence, this means that it is no longer legitimate to play off concrete pastoral action against general doctrine, so that pastoral action – especially with regard to ethically controversial issues – is not interpreted as right, but 'only' as merciful, while 'doctrine' stands for the really correct action, because then the hermeneutical cycle between lived faith and doctrine would be cut off. Diversity in practice represents the necessary consequence of the fact that norms have to be concretised into the situation. The possibility of error therefore no longer lies only with the individual believers, while the representatives of an abstract doctrine can never err – rather, sense insights of practice can and must have a retroactive effect on doctrine. One could say that, in the Pope's sense, the diversity of practice reflects, first and foremost, not the erroneousness of its application, but the best possible realisation of the norm given the circumstances in each case. Indeed, the contextually diverse actions can embody 'what for now is the most generous response which can be given to God' (AL 303).⁵³ Possible errors are not excluded, but are not central.

49 Cf. J. Sautermeister, "Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen...", p. 174.

50 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 63.

51 Cf. J. Sautermeister, "Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen...", p. 180.

52 Cf. G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, pp. 504.

53 Cf. C. M. Kelly, 'The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*', p. 929. Pope Francis, Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia* (19.3.2016), http://www.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco-esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (accessed on 30.12.2020) (referred to as AL).

The driving force for the Pope, however, is not norm-theoretical questions, but the view of the pastoral situation, which he sees as an opportunity for accompaniment and evangelisation. In the natural law tradition of Thomas Aquinas, he trusts that every human being can recognise what is good, and likewise that faith supports reason in its recognition of the good (cf. LF 34). In this respect, the ethical problem comes into view primarily as a starting point for pastoral assistance, as an occasion for integrating people into the community.

With regard to ecclesial ethics, however, consideration of the individual case is not sufficient. The given diversity of cultural and situational conditions for action requires that the communication processes be extended beyond the individual case to a larger level, from the diocesan level to that of the Bishops' Conferences and finally also universally to that of the Synod of Bishops, in order to preserve the unity of the Church. Conflicts can arise at every level, and in the interest of the well-being of the entire Church, they must also be endured where they cannot be resolved, but in a spirit that G. Mannion has characterized as 'reconciled diversity',⁵⁴ which could be understood as hope for an eschatological unity. For the purpose of moving towards such a unity, the Pope refers to principles and a process method which will be presented here very briefly, because they also represent important guidelines for an ecclesial ethic as figures of thought.

1.5 *Creating Unity Through Continuous Dialogue in the Sense of the 'Four Principles'*

Since different actors and concerns in the Church develop their own dynamics, unity is not something that can be broken over the knee. According to the Pope, premature and false harmonisation should be avoided: '... one must always widen one's gaze to discern a greater good that benefits us all'.⁵⁵ As a characteristic of processes by which ecclesial diversity can be steered in the sense of unity, the Pope describes four principles (cf. EG 220). S. Scheingraber calls them the Pope's 'implicit ecclesiology'.⁵⁶ They serve to establish peace, justice and fraternity and are closely linked to the principles of Catholic social teaching (cf. EG 221). They were originally used by J. M. de Rosas (1793–1877), one of the governors of Buenos Aires.⁵⁷

54 G. Mannion, 'Francis's Ecclesiological Revolution', p. 104.

55 Pope Francis, 'Schreiben "An das pilgernde Volk Gottes" in Deutschland (29.6.2019)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/de/letters/2019/documents/papa-francesco_20190629-lettera-fedeligermania.html (accessed on December 30, 2020).

56 S. Scheingraber, *Aufbruch zu einer "verbeulten Kirche"*, pp. 103–104.

57 The overview that follows is based on G. Dietlein, 'Teología del Pueblo', pp. 62–64.

The first principle, 'Unity is more important than conflict', refers to solidarity. Justified conflicts must be perceived and their resolution sought (cf. LF 55; EG 226–230).⁵⁸ Conflict is overcome at a higher level, where each group can join the other in a new reality, while remaining faithful to itself. Everything is resolved 'on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides.' (QA 104, quoting EG 228)⁵⁹ Unity cannot be brought about artificially, it is a fruit of the Holy Spirit. Conflict resolution should therefore lead neither to syncretism nor to the 'absorption of the other'.⁶⁰

The second principle, 'The whole is more important than the individual parts', refers to the common good and subsidiarity. According to Pope Francis, the double view of regional specificity and the whole of the Church is needed. He illustrates this principle with the figure of the polyhedron, which represents unity in diversity (cf. EG 237) and is therefore also a symbol for ecumenical cooperation between Christian churches (cf. EG 236).

The third principle, 'Time is more important than space', refers to the fact that not all problems can be solved immediately and that processes must therefore be set in motion that can lead to success in the future (cf. LF 57, EG 222–224).

The fourth principle, 'Reality is more important than the idea', stands for the primacy of practice, of energetic commitment to humanity (cf. EG 231–234).⁶¹

1.6 *Process Method: See-Judge-Act*

In addition to these principles, the Pope uses the three-step method 'see-judge-act',⁶² which was applied in Vatican II in the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* after initial discussion, to shape pastoral processes.⁶³ This method found its way into liberation theology and was already implemented in the Aparecida document.⁶⁴ The preparation and implementation of the Synod on the Family

58 Pope Francis, 'Encyclical Letter Lumen fidei (29.6.2013)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20130629_enciclica-lumen-fidei.html (accessed on January 3, 2021).

59 Pope Francis, 'Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonia (2020)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html (accessed on December 17, 2020). The Pope refers to the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops' conferences, 'Aparecida Document (29.6.2007)'.

60 S. Scheingraber, *Aufbruch zu einer "verbeulten Kirche"*, p. 110.

61 G. Dietlein, 'Teología del Pueblo', p. 63.

62 Cf. C. Schickendantz, 'Züge einer neuen Identität', in K. Appel, J. H. Deibl (eds), *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe*, pp. 114–127, at p. 122.

63 Cf. G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, p. 487.

64 Cf. Pope Francis, 'Address to the Leadership of the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America during the General Coordination Meeting (28.7.2013) during the Apostolic Journey to Rio de

also followed this structure.⁶⁵ Pope Francis is aware that even such processes of opinion-forming for the whole Church do not necessarily lead to a satisfactory answer and warns that one should beware of premature determinations: 'A Pastoral Magisterium does not offer premature doctrinal pronouncements on controversial issues.'⁶⁶ Nor can such processes simply be cut short in a directive way by an imposed structural change. The Pope is convinced that it is not the replacement of one form of organisation by another that leads to a change in the life of the Church, but that this requires a renewal from within: 'What makes obsolete structures pass away, what leads to a change of heart in Christians, is precisely *missionary spirit*.'⁶⁷ The aim is to 'develop a communion in differences' through these processes.⁶⁸

2 Contours of an Ecclesial Ethic

What do these observations mean for ecclesial ethics and its development? Ecclesial ethics represents the totality of principles, moral guidelines and norms which are discussed, elaborated and proclaimed in pronouncements as doctrine, taught and disseminated within the framework of ecclesiastical procedures. Following G. Mannion's functional understanding of magisterium,⁶⁹ moral theology – as a theological discipline which, apart from its scientific tasks, can perform both a service to doctrine and to the pastoral work of the Church – plays also a magisterial role in this process. As has become clear, due to the pastoral guiding principles and methods of Pope Francis, it is far easier to determine processes and procedures in the environment of an ecclesial ethic than its content contours. Therefore, the recognisable procedural framework

Janeiro (Brazil) on the occasion of the 28th World Youth Day (22–29 July 2013), http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/july/documents/papa-francesco_20130728_gmg-celam-rio.html (accessed on December 30, 2020). W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, pp. 20–21. Kasper mentions its origins in the work of Cardinal Joseph Cardijn (1882–1967), its recommendation in Pope John XXIII's Social Encyclical *Mater et magistra* (1961), its reception by the Latin American Episcopate in Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979) and Aparecida (2007), where the future Pope Francis played an important role for the composition of the final document.

65 Cf. J. Schuster, 'Auf dem Weg zu einer neuen Gestaltung des päpstlichen Lehramtes?', pp. 231–232.

66 R. R. Gaillardetz, 'Pope Francis and the Rise of a Pastoral Magisterium (2016)'.

67 Pope Francis, 'Address to the Leadership (28.7.2013)'.

68 C. M. Galli, 'Die Ekklesiologie von Papst Franziskus', p. 52.

69 G. Mannion, 'The Morality of Magisterium', *Annali di studi religiosi* 12 (2011), pp. 87–108, at p. 87, footnote 1.

conditions of ecclesial ethics will first be explained before possible approaches to determining its content are addressed.

2.1 *The Attitude of Wanting to Understand*

A first procedural cornerstone concerns the preconditions of ecclesial ethics. It consists in the fact that the representatives of the Church's teaching authority, that is, in particular the Pope, the bishops, but also the theologians, must first be concerned with the will to understand the people. The competence necessary for this has been described by the Spanish theologian X. Zubiri who called it 'sensitive understanding'.⁷⁰ It is the readiness for a hermeneutical exploration of what the faithful consider to be consistent with their faith and the Christian tradition in the area of the moral. The starting point is thus people's experience of life, which is why H. M. Yáñez describes the Pope's understanding of ministry as rooted in the wisdom tradition.⁷¹

2.2 *Learning from the Sensus Fidei Fidelium in Ethical Questions*

A second cornerstone concerns the exploration of the experience of the laity as a source for the teaching of the Church. The International Theological Commission has already clearly pointed out this connection.⁷² Since the laity, by virtue of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, can understand, live and proclaim the truth of revelation, the attention of the Magisterium must be directed not only to faith but also to the moral judgement of the faithful and its application to life.⁷³ Faith and the moral understanding that results from it are no longer seen as static, as in neo-scholasticism, but both continue to develop through the practice of life.⁷⁴ This is true for personal life as well as for the community of believers and the Church in its universal dimension. Application and experience enable a hermeneutical circle between practice, understanding, interpretation and renewed application on all these levels.⁷⁵ The subject of an ecclesial ethic is therefore the faithful in community, the whole people of God.⁷⁶

⁷⁰ J. C. Scannone, *La théologie du peuple. Racines théologiques du pape François* (Namur/Paris: Lessius, 2017), p. 240.

⁷¹ H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco: un nuovo slancio per la teologia morale?', *Teologia. Rivista della facoltà teologica dell'Italia settentrionale* 42 (2017), pp. 171–193, at p. 188.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 186.

⁷³ International Theological Commission, 'Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church (2014)', Nos. 44 and 45.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, No. 53.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, No. 59.

⁷⁶ Cf. E. Gillen, 'Für eine Theologie der Moral und eine integrale Welt-Ethik. Wie Papst Franziskus Theologie und Ethik von innen heraus neu ausrichtet', in P.-C. Chittilappilly

The representatives of the Magisterium can listen to the experience of believers in all areas of life – family, work, culture, faith.⁷⁷ In this way, all Christians can assist the Church in formulating its teaching. The International Theological Commission not only explains this practice, but also identifies it as the practice of the Church by means of historical examples.⁷⁸ It concludes that the episcopal Magisterium should seek advice from the laity and also consult them before establishing a doctrine.⁷⁹ 'Not only do they [the laity] have the right to be heard, but their reaction to what is proposed as belonging to the faith of the Apostles must be taken very seriously, because it is by the Church as a whole that the apostolic faith is borne in the power of the Spirit.'⁸⁰

2.3 *Moral Truth is to be Understood in Dialogue with the Sciences and Society*

Since the experiences of believers are made in the context of a particular culture, truth has a dialogical character. Church ethics must therefore work in an interdisciplinary way to understand truth and grasp its universal content.⁸¹ A third cornerstone of ecclesial ethics is therefore that the Church learns for its ethics not only from the faithful, but also from culture and the sciences, and must therefore strive to discern reality in dialogue with them. In this sense, Pope Francis recognises the autonomy of earthly realities described by Vatican II in GS 36.⁸² He consistently takes up the interdisciplinarity of moral theology, which developed in the course of the twentieth century in response to the differentiation of scientific research, also for the shaping of ecclesial ethics. This is evident in the interdisciplinary approach especially of the encyclical *Laudato si'*.⁸³

(ed.), *Horizonte gegenwärtiger Ethik: Festschrift für Josef Schuster SJ* (Freiburg/Basel/Vienna: Herder, 2016), pp. 268–79, at p. 278.

77 H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco', p. 185.

78 International Theological Commission, 'Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church (2014)', No. 73.

79 Ibid., No. 121. Cf. O. Rush, 'Inverting the Pyramid: The Sensus Fidelium in a Synodal Church', p. 312.

80 Ibid., No. 74.

81 Ibid. Cf. Pope Francis, 'Letter to a Non-Believer. Response to Dr. Eugenio Scalfari, Journalist of the Italian Newspaper "La Repubblica" (4.9.2013)', http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130911_eugenio-scalfari.html (accessed on December 30, 2020). Cf. International Theological Commission, 'In Search of a Universal Ethic: A New Look at the Natural Law (2009)', http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20090520_legge-naturale_en.html (accessed on December 30, 2020).

82 Cf. H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco', p. 189.

83 Cf. Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Laudato si'* (24.5.2015), (http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html) (accessed on January 2, 2021).

In addition to dialogue with other sciences, there is also dialogue with social movements (LS 166). A new attentiveness is necessary to observe the transformation of values and solidarity in society in order to find approaches for cooperation with other actors in culture on the one hand and for the evangelisation of culture on the other.⁸⁴ According to the Pope, theology could play a supporting role in this field: the task of the theologians is described as ‘To hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word ...’⁸⁵

If one considers the significance of this interdisciplinary and social dialogue, the striving for universal guidelines can be conceived only intersubjectively, dialogically and ultimately transculturally.⁸⁶ This effort for dialogue is supported by the ecclesiology already described. Human beings cannot be seen as individuals, they always live in community and are called to community with others.⁸⁷ This community does not end with the Christian community, but the latter lives embedded in a culture and is influenced by it, as it should influence it. Therefore, an integral part of attention to society is also fraternity with all people.⁸⁸ An ecclesial ethic is also built on this ‘ecclesiology of the “we”’,⁸⁹ as C. Galli calls it.

2.4 *Reception by the Faithful as a Review of Ecclesial Ethics*

A fourth cornerstone of ecclesial ethics is the feedback of the faithful towards a proclaimed ecclesial ethical teaching. The reception of the teaching shows whether the people of God find it consistent with the apostolic tradition: “Reception” may be described as a process by which, guided by the Spirit, the people of God recognizes intuitions or insights and integrates them into the patterns and structures of its life and worship, accepting a new witness to the truth and corresponding forms of its expression, because it perceives

84 Cf. H. M. Yáñez, ‘La “forma di Chiesa” nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco’, pp. 189–190.

85 Pope Francis, ‘Address to Members of the International Theological Commission (6.12.2013)’, http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/december/documents/papa-francesco_20131206_commissione-teologica.html (accessed on December 30, 2020). Cf. G. K. Goulding, *A Church of Passion and Hope: The Formation of an Ecclesial Disposition from Ignatius Loyola to Pope Francis and the New Evangelization* (London and New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2016), p. 305.

86 Cf. L. Hogan/J. D’Arcy May, ‘Intercultural, Interreligious and Public Theology. Visions of Ecumenism’, *Concilium* (D) 47 (2011), pp. 58–69, at p. 68. Cf. M. Eckholt, ‘Die Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis’, p. 118.

87 Cf. E. Gillen, ‘Für eine Theologie der Moral und eine integrale Welt-Ethik’, p. 275.

88 Cf. H. M. Yáñez, ‘La “forma di Chiesa” nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco’, p. 190.

89 G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, pp. 494.

them to be in accord with the apostolic Tradition.⁹⁰ This process of reception, which is thus at the same time a review of Church teaching in the faith of all the baptised, applies not only to questions of faith in the narrower sense, but also to moral questions that are part of Church teaching.⁹¹ For these, too, the following applies: 'If a teaching of the Magisterium is not well accepted, then the bishops must ask why. Is it badly expressed or partial?'⁹²

2.5 *The Reformulation of Magisterial Teaching is Integrated in Processes*

Therefore, if an ecclesial ethic is to be formulated, this starting point makes numerous processes necessary. Apart from the already mentioned necessary dialogues with actors in society and with the sciences (cf. EG 242) and religions (cf. LS 201), communication processes within the church must be initiated and accompanied.⁹³ This involves summarising and systematising the experiences expressed by believers so that they can be addressed at the diocesan or bishops' conference level. Due to the cultural character of these insights, the regional results would have to be brought into the dialogue with other local churches in such a way that understanding for this view can be brought about in other local churches. In this way, a world-wide, intercultural process can take place for the development of guidelines which can at the same time provide orientation and be open for inculturation. These processes can contribute to a greater unity of the church in its diversity.⁹⁴ The Amazon Synod serves as a good example: small working groups systematised their results, which took place regionally and finally supraregionally.⁹⁵ The resulting document is an impressive attempt to provide insights and understanding even for people who are not affected by this reality of life.

The fact that Pope Francis primarily wants to initiate processes has also provoked criticism because the need for change identified in the process is

90 International Theological Commission, 'Sensus fidei in the Life of the Church (2014)', No. 78.

91 H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco', p. 187.

92 T. Radcliffe, 'How Can We "Make Room for the Conscience of the Faithful"?', in: K. Le Knieps-Port Roi (ed.), *A Point of No Return? Amoris Laetitia on Marriage, Divorce and Remarriage* (Berlin: LIT, 2017), pp. 65–73, at p. 69.

93 For reflections about the cooperation of the *sensus fidei fidelium*, the magisterium and the theologians cf. R. R. Gaillardetz, *By What Authority? Foundations for Understanding Authority in the Church*, revised and expanded edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), p. 146–152.

94 Cf. S. Müller, 'Die Kirchlichkeit der Moraltheologie. Impulses from a Catholic Theological Perspective', in J. Platzer and E. Zissler (eds), *Bioethics and Religion. Theological Ethics in Public Discourse* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), pp. 197–216, at pp. 207–209.

95 I would like to thank M. K. Salfinger for calling my attention to this process.

supposed to be reflected in changed doctrine.⁹⁶ It is clear that Pope Francis does not want to implement a structural change in the Church or a change in doctrine through majority votes or decrees, which would lead to parts of Christians feeling excluded. Rather, change is only possible through a 'fermenting process' and by slowly battling out the points of contention. This is because, as S. Scheingraber explains, according to the Pope's pneumatology, every Christian should contribute and every opinion is important:

The church reform that Pope Francis has initiated is something that has to be won, in the dispute between conservatives and liberals, in the dispute between laity and ministers, in the dispute between the bishops among themselves, also in the dispute between the denominations and religions. But there is always one programme in the foreground: to make it possible for people to encounter the inconceivable God in the risen Jesus Christ through the Holy Spirit.⁹⁷

To install such processes not only sees God's presence in every person, but also ensures that magisterium, which is defined as the function (i.e. activity, practice and service) of teaching with authority⁹⁸ works in a constructive and participatory way and therefore shows its moral character.⁹⁹

3 Content Contours of an Ecclesial Ethic

From the observations on Pope Francis' ecclesiology as well as the pastoral principles, we can now also derive some cornerstones for shaping the content of ecclesial ethics.

3.1 *The Application of a Hierarchy of Truths*

A first indication of this is that Pope Francis applies the Vatican II teaching on the hierarchy of truths in a new way. 'It calls for interpreting the many and varied truths from their Christological ground and centre (UR 11; EG 36).'¹⁰⁰ This focus on the central message of the Christian faith is what Gaillardetz

⁹⁶ Cf. S. Scheingraber, *Aufbruch zu einer "verbeulten Kirche"*, p. 127.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁹⁸ Cf. G. Mannion, 'The Morality of the Magisterium', p. 87.

⁹⁹ Cf. G. Mannion, 'The Morality of the Magisterium', p. 108.

¹⁰⁰ W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 42. Cf. Vatican II, 'Decree on Ecumenism Unitatis Redintegratio (21.11.1964)'; available at: Unitatis redintegratio (vatican.va) (accessed on January 6, 2021).

calls 'doctrinal humility'.¹⁰¹ From these reflections it emerges that the concern of the Church cannot be a formulation of countless norms, but rather a deeper understanding of what is important. 'This requires not only a focus on the centre of faith, but also the ability to perceive the whole of the Gospel in *the* individual and to be surprised by the diversity of forms of faith ...'.¹⁰²

3.2 *Mercy and Love as Interpretive Keys for Truth and Virtues*

A second point of reference for the content of ecclesiastical ethics is that the Pope applies a discernment of spirits in the area of ethics as well as in matters of faith. He names mercy and love as criteria for this. These should not replace norms, but help to recognise their true meaning: 'To play mercy off against truth or against the commandments and to bring them into opposition to each other is therefore theologically nonsensical. On the other hand, it is correct to understand mercy, which is the fundamental quality of God and the greatest of all virtues (EG 37), in the sense of the hierarchy of truths as a hermeneutical principle ...'.¹⁰³

According to W. Kasper, this is 'a paradigm shift ... from a deductive method to a method in the sense of see – judge – act, which first starts inductively and only introduces theological criteria in the second step'.¹⁰⁴ The approach with God's mercy as the key concept wants to involve human being completely, with their inner being, and lead to an honest encounter with other people, instead of demanding a performance morality that leads to attaching more importance to the outward appearance of correct behaviour than to God's mercy (cf. AL 311): 'This Pope makes it clear that moral norms and rules are, in the Christian view, auxiliary constructions to keep love and life alive. They must not contradict or oppose their purpose and legitimate *raison d'être*'.¹⁰⁵

Therefore, the Pope's approach can only be understood against the background of his mystical approach to the encounter with people: the connection between spirituality and morality has the consequence 'that theological growth takes precedence over the correctness of action'.¹⁰⁶ The emphasis on mercy and love as the key to judging actions has, on the one hand, consequences for the understanding and hierarchy of virtues.¹⁰⁷ On the other hand,

101 R. R. Gaillardetz, 'Pope Francis and the Rise of a Pastoral Magisterium (2016)'.

102 C. Theobald, "Mystik der Fraternité". Kirche und Theologie in neuem Stil', in K. Appel, J. H. Deibl (eds), *Barmherzigkeit und zärtliche Liebe*, pp. 21–38, at p. 31.

103 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 50.

104 Ibid.

105 E. Gillen, 'Für eine Theologie der Moral und eine integrale Welt-Ethik', p. 274.

106 H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco', p. 191.

107 Cf. G. Bergner, *Volk Gottes*, pp. 500–501. Cf. EG 36–37.

it underlines that truth is understood as concrete truth in a concrete situation, 'in the sense of the biblical faithfulness-truth of God (*emet*) ...'.¹⁰⁸ Therefore, in a concrete individual case, only the individual can decide before God whether an ecclesiastical rule must be implemented or suspended. Truth is dynamic because it shows itself in dialogue with Christ. This is why the Pope refrains from speaking of 'absolute truth' without advocating relativism, 'because, for Christians, truth is mediated through a relationship with a person, Jesus Christ. As such, truth is always encountered in history.'¹⁰⁹ The Pope assumes that magisterial statements must always be reinterpreted and is thus in agreement with K. Rahner's approach to the history of salvation.¹¹⁰

3.3 *Conscience As an Expression of the Instinct of Faith*

A third point of reference concerns the indispensable importance of the personal conscience. Ecclesial ethics as an expression of the Church's sense of faith (*sensus fidei ecclesiae*) should guide the faithful and serve as a criterion when reflecting on personal decisions. At the same time, the personal conscience expresses this sense of faith in a concrete situation, that is to say that personal reason, as well as the ecclesial model, participate in the judgement of conscience.¹¹¹

Here the importance of training the conscience becomes clear (cf. EG 64). This should be done essentially through the community,¹¹² but always in the form of support for the personal judgement of conscience, not as an anticipation of it. The purpose of ecclesial ethics is to help conform one's own lifestyle to that of the Gospel (Cf. EG 168). However, it is up to each individual to concretise this goal in practice. Pastoral ministry and moral theologians should act as 'counsellors for conscience' and provide criteria that are helpful in everyday life.¹¹³ Thus, as C. M. Kelly points out with reference to AL 303, every believer is able, with the help of his or her conscience, to recognise in advance what God requires, to recognise one's own limits in view of the respective context and to reflect on which action is justifiable in view of the given ideal, even if it does not fulfil it.¹¹⁴

108 W. Kasper, *Papst Franziskus – Revolution der Zärtlichkeit und der Liebe*, p. 61.

109 R. R. Gaillardetz, 'Pope Francis and the Rise of a Pastoral Magisterium (2016)'.

110 Cf. Ibid.

111 Cf. H. M. Yáñez, 'La "forma di Chiesa" nei documenti magisteriali di Francesco', pp. 187–188.

112 Cf. J. Sautermeister, "Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen...", p. 178.

113 C. M. Kelly, 'The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Church: A Proposal in Light of *Amoris Laetitia*', *Theological Studies* 77 (2016), pp. 922–948, at p. 922.

114 Cf. Ibid., pp. 926–927.

Likewise, the parishes must critically reflect on their own attitudes from faith again and again. In such a way, they can avoid 'corruption in self-deception, rationalization, and groupthink' and 'help the faithful navigate the possibility of doubt so that they can still make moral choices with confidence and not just humility' and to develop a 'culture of moral discernment in the Church'.¹¹⁵ Therefore, Christians should develop 'strong personal consciences'. These can developed by 'daring to hear what the pastors of the Church say, what the Word of God in the scriptures says, what the saints and the thinkers say. When we do this, then we hear the quiet whisper of the Lord summoning us to freedom and God's own joy'.¹¹⁶ Through such discernment, conscience gains the freedom to speak out against dehumanising and anti-social tendencies in society (cf. AL 267).

3.4 *Focus on Guidelines for Practice*

A fourth point of reference concerns the character of ecclesial ethics. Ecclesial ethics assumes the character of guidelines for the faithful.¹¹⁷ It limits itself 'to proclaiming and safeguarding those moral principles and norms that bind all ... whose non-observance would betray the biblical message of liberation to love and respect for the dignity of every human being' (cf. AL 3).¹¹⁸

Church ethics in this sense is a 'model ethics',¹¹⁹ in whose implementation and adaptation to local traditions the faithful themselves must lend a hand. In this way, hermeneutical processes and feedback loops constantly arise. In the communal togetherness of the faithful in the local church, 'concrete guiding principles and norms become visible as lived models and biographical examples'¹²⁰ and serve as an orientation. These principles and norms are reflected in the church at the various levels and taken into account in the shaping of new guidelines, which in turn serve as orientation for Christian living together.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 931, 940.

¹¹⁶ T. Radcliffe, 'How Can We "Make Room for the Conscience of the Faithful"?', p. 73.

¹¹⁷ Cf. J. Knop, 'Amoris laetitia – Über die Liebe in der Familie. Ein Kommentar', in J. Knop and J. Löffeld (eds), *Ganz familiär. Die Bischofssynode 2014/15 in der Debatte* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet 2016), pp. 13–42, at p. 38. Cf. also EG 17.

¹¹⁸ H. J. Pottmeyer, 'Volk Gottes auf dem Weg. Das Kirchenverständnis von Papst Franziskus als Schlüssel zu Amoris laetitia', in: S. Goertz and C. Witting (eds), *Amoris laetitia – Wendepunkt für die Moraltheologie?*, p. 330.

¹¹⁹ E. Kos, 'Von Felsblöcken und Zärtlichkeit. Aufbrüche und Kurskorrekturen in der Sexualmoral', in: E. Kos (ed), *"Der Papst ändert keine einzige Lehre, und doch ändert er alles." Aufbrüche und Veränderungen in der Katholischen Kirche mit Papst Franziskus* (Berlin: LIT, 2019), pp. 13–59, at p. 59.

¹²⁰ J. Sautermeister, "Prozesse in Gang zu setzen anstatt Räume zu besitzen...", p. 178.

In the practical shaping of these in life, traditions and value hierarchies of the various regional cultures exert influence. The conscience of the faithful, trained by the Gospel and receiving both affirmation and potential for criticism from it, intuitively grasps which actions lead to a good life, that is, to greater closeness to God. However, every individualistic interpretation must be corrected to the effect that the whole people of God, indeed all people, must always remain in view.

The decisive factor for the question of which of the existing ecclesiastical norms are taken into account in practice and in what way is therefore the *sensus fidelium*, the sense of faith of each baptised person given in baptism and matured in experience with the practice of faith, which expresses itself in conscience. This practice-oriented approach to ethical questions is typically liberation theological in that it follows the premise of perceiving reality and taking it seriously. Like moral theology, ecclesial ethics is therefore also subject to critical examination by the faithful as to whether it responds to concrete questions or finds answers to questions that are not asked at all or are not (any longer) relevant to the faithful.¹²¹ However, this attention is only possible in the course of decentralisation (EG 16) and goes hand in hand with pluralisation, which is why ecclesial ethics would tend to understand norms in their etymological significance as guidelines that are open to variation in their contextual application.

4 Conclusion: Ecclesial Ethics as the Ethos of a Church on the Way

Against the background of the Pope's ecclesiology, ecclesial ethics needs to adopt the same process character that every other ecclesial expression of faith has. In its ethics, too, the Church is on the way. It undertakes this pilgrimage as a community which, despite all the differences of cultures, is united by faith in the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. In the Pope's view, however, the Church is not an end in itself, a self-affirmation or a delimitation of a 'holy flock'. In this way, it fails in its defining task of being a leaven and thus becoming involved in all matters of culture, that is to say the concrete living environment of a region and a country, especially where the (survival) of the socially weak and disadvantaged is at stake. For this reason, church ethics cannot be a closed system, but depends on being in dialogue with all people and looking at all experiences before the Gospel in order to weigh them and discover the personal

¹²¹ I would like to acknowledge M. K. Salfinger for sharing her insights into Latin American Liberation Theology with me, which have influenced this passage.

starting points for improving people's situations. Guidelines should therefore help people to act sensibly and responsibly, within the limits of their own abilities. For church ethics, this results in a tension between necessary self-restraint – in order to leave room for the cultural conditions of action – and the necessity to concretely support people in their search for the good that they can realise in their lives.

This systemic flexibility naturally provokes questions such as: Who guarantees that the basic pillars of the faith are also properly implemented? How can unity be preserved in the face of the expected diversity? Don't people become disoriented or feel left alone due to a lack of uniform or concrete norms?

This indicated tension between the elaboration of guidelines or more concrete norms from lived faith on the one hand and the challenges of concrete practice in individual cases on the other cannot be removed. It can only be filled by courageous living, the commitment of those accompanying as well as of the faithful themselves. Church ethics must therefore offer open space, because otherwise activity would be stifled and the church would become something static and irrelevant for society. Church ethics therefore goes beyond what was described at the beginning of the fourth section. It is about more than internal church processes of finding and proclaiming moral guidelines, namely precisely about lived ethics, about the commitment of all the baptised and their church companions in daily life. Pope Francis sets an example in this: through his visits to migrant camps, through his invitations to the homeless, through donations to crisis areas.

The task of ecclesial ethics is to enable people to act. To do this, it must shine the lamp of the Gospel in such a way that believers can walk with it as if it were a worldwide lantern festival. The light of the lamps is nourished by many dialogues: with culture, the sciences, but above all with the core of the Gospel, the message of love and mercy.¹²² Such an ecclesial ethic is the consequence of an ecclesiology as described as a vision shortly after the end of Vatican II and now brought to life by Pope Francis:

I would expect it to be a radically open and pluralistic community, one which maintains a world-wide presence and the institutional structures which that necessitates, but which, eschewing rigid organizational boundaries, conveys its message and extends its compassion to all men.

¹²² Cf. A. Fumagalli, *Camminare nell'amore. La teologia morale di papa Francesco* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2017), p. 109.

I would expect it, in fact, to begin to approximate to the model of the Church as 'outer-oriented movement'.¹²³

Of course, it should be noted here that the processes of ecclesial ethics derived from ecclesiology – learning from the *sensus fidei fidelium*, its systematisation in ecclesial teaching and the guidelines for personal action thereby elaborated – must not lead to the false idea that through them a complete harmony between the practice of the faithful and the teaching of the Magisterium could be established, at least when it comes to concrete norms and not only to more general guidelines. This is due to the difference between the two. The preliminary remarks on inculturation have shown by way of example that within the Church one must assume a cultural diversity which is multiplied with regard to the individual believers. This diversity can never be fully captured in the processes of reception, which must necessarily structure and thereby make a selection.¹²⁴ Conversely, doctrine in its generality cannot expect every believer to fill it with life in every situation, since it always requires cultural and situational interpretation. Ecclesial teaching on ethics in its written form can thus never fully capture the ethos of the Church, the ethical life of Christians in its diversity. However, the above-mentioned processes take into account the variability as well as the situationally and culturally different forms of expression of Christian action, and the attempt is made to bring both – teaching and practice – closer together within the framework of an ecclesial ethic.

Having applied Pope Francis' ecclesiology as signposts for ecclesial ethics, both in form and content, it is not only a Vatican II ecclesial vision that comes closer to its realization, but also a way opens to fulfilling the claim for a morality of magisterium, understood as 'an activity, practice, even a service'¹²⁵ performed by various actors from the Pope to the faithful. This requires a changing attitude in ecclesial discourse, self-confidence of the baptized, a

¹²³ F. Oakley, *Council Over Pope? Towards a Provisional Ecclesiology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), p. 184. He refers to the concept of outer-oriented movement described by G. Baum, *The Credibility of the Church Today. A Reply to Charles Davis* (London/New York: Herder & Herder, 1968), pp. 196–199.

¹²⁴ Cf. H.-J. Sander, 'Komplexität steigern. Glaubenszeugnisse jenseits der Verlustängste der kirchlichen Lehre', in A. Slunitschek and T. Bremer (eds), *Der Glaubenssinn der Gläubigen als Ort theologischer Erkenntnis. Praktische und systematische Theologie im Gespräch*, pp. 281–300, at p. 289. Pope Francis is aware of this challenge, cf. AL 303: 'Recognizing the influence of such concrete factors, we can add that individual conscience needs to be better incorporated into the Church's praxis in certain situations which do not objectively embody our understanding of marriage.'

¹²⁵ G. Mannion, 'The Morality of Magisterium', p. 95.

truly pastoral ministry and a strong practice-orientation. 'Can the change be embraced throughout the church?' This question raised by G. Mannion characterizes the challenge to walk the way that was indicated. He answered it in a prophetic way: 'History suggests that it can, and eventually, will.'¹²⁶

¹²⁶ G. Mannion, 'The Morality of Magisterium', p. 108.