

# Pope Francis' Pastoral Revolution

*Our mission: Attend to the law of gradualness*

By BIAGIO MAZZA

Pope Francis' second apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* ("The Joy of Love"), continues to generate interest. Many appreciate Francis' pastoral approach to the family and the various complex issues that arise in living out the Christian ideal of marriage. Others perceive the document as moving away from or even weakening traditional Catholic teaching on marriage, causing confusion on the part of the faithful.

The "law of gradualness," a principle used in Catholic moral and pastoral theology, has become a lightning rod for disagreement and divisiveness in Francis' pastoral revolution. Also known as gradualism, this concept was positively discussed at the 2014 and 2015 synods on the family and evangelization, but this key principle of reform was not included in the final document. Francis does include it in *Amoris Laetitia* as a key piece of his focus on God's love and mercy for all.

In chapter 8 of *Amoris Laetitia*, Francis devotes space to unpacking the "law of gradualness" (#291-295). Francis' words continue to generate controversy around his approach to love and family. He explains this concept by quoting St. John Paul II's apostolic exhortation from the 1980 Synod on the Family, *Familiaris Consortio* (#34). Francis states that it was John Paul II "who proposed the so-called 'law of gradualness' in the knowledge that the human being 'knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by different stages of growth'" (AL #295) In other words, conversion and moral good is a gradual process that is marked by growth and failing.

Francis acknowledges that the "law of gradualness" is not to be confused with the "gradualness of law," a watering down of Christian values or ideals. Some see Francis' pastoral approach as a change in or weakening of church teaching. Francis is not changing or weakening the ideal of



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marriage and family life. Rather, with the biblical prophets, Jesus and the best of Christian tradition, Francis is aware that human beings often fail or fall short in carrying out Christian ideals and values. This shortcoming does not separate us from God's grace or from the community. Instead, it challenges the church community to reach out to, care for and offer hope to those who fall short in their desire to draw closer to God.

Francis quotes the synod fathers who "stated that, although the Church realizes that any breach of the marriage bond 'is against the will of God,' she is also 'conscious of the frailty of many of her children' ... Although she constantly holds up the call to perfection and asks for a fuller response to God, 'the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children'" (AL #291). This is the difference between the "law of gradualness" contrasted with the "gradualness of law."

Francis is not advocating a compromise of Christian values and ideals, i.e., "gradualness of law." Rather, he suggests a compassionate, merciful and loving attention to as well as engagement with those who for whatever reason fail to live up to Christian ideals, i.e., "law of gradualness." By attending to the law of gradualness

"the Church ... restores in them (the weakest of her children) hope and confidence, like a beacon of a lighthouse in a port or a torch carried among the people to enlighten those who have lost their way or who are in the midst of a storm. Let us not forget that the Church's task is often like that of a field hospital" (AL #291).

In *Familiaris Consortio*, St. John Paul II acknowledges that in living out the Christian values and ideals "what is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which ... is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus, a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually" (#9). John Paul II also recognizes that each Christian "who has been called to live God's wise and loving design in a responsible manner, is an historical being who day by day builds himself up through his many free decisions; and so he knows, loves and accomplishes moral good by stages of growth" (FC #34).

The law of gradualness recognizes that conversion of mind and heart, of becoming more and more like Christ, is a gradual, lifelong dynamic process. There is no point at which we have arrived. The call to holiness is the ongoing program of our lives, and each one of us journeys that path at our own pace, usually determined by the free choices we make.

For Francis, gradualism necessitates dialogue, discernment and a cultivation of the role of conscience in decision-making. Francis challenges all to attend to the law of gradualness in accompanying those who are hurting or are in "irregular situations" in relationship to Christian values and ideals. They are still children of God, and we are to care and reach out to them as integral members of the Christian family.

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