

## **“Hopeful Gradualness” and Ecclesial Mission**

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On October 13, 2014, the remarkable midterm *relatio* of the 2014 Synod on the Family invoked the *legge di gradualità* on four occasions. This “law of gradualness” would later be dropped from the final *relatio*, though inarguably its vestiges remained. Simultaneously the locus of disappointment, apprehension, and excitement, the term’s precise meaning remained and continues to remain unclear. Speaking for its absence in the final report, Cardinal Donald Wuerl admitted that “It’s not a concept that you find well-expounded, well-defined, well-developed.”<sup>1</sup> Taking the principle to be what Ladislav Orsy would term a “seminal locution” and thus in need of further explication, this paper will examine the law of gradualness through a diachronic lens.<sup>2</sup> It will trace the term’s evolution from its initial emergence around *Humanae vitae* (*HV*) during the late 1960s and early 1970s, to its reserved acceptance into ecclesiastical parlance in the 1980 Synod on the Family and *Familiaris Consortio* (*FC*), to its use this past October at the 2014 Synod. It is the contention of this paper that the 2014 Synod marked a new expansion of the term. Moving away from its initial contentious identification with *HV*, in the papacy of Francis, the law of gradualness has become a fundamentally hope-filled spirituality for ecclesial mission.

The 1960s witnessed an increased theological awareness of the inherent tensions and general messiness of Christians living out moral ideals in the real world. This awareness laid the foundations of gradualness. Indeed, in 1966, Helmut Thielicke, a German Lutheran theologian, could title a chapter of his *Theological Ethics* as “The Conflict Situation as Typical of Man’s

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<sup>1</sup> Matt Hadro, “How One Cardinal Proposes to Correct Ignorance of Marriage’s Nature,” Catholic News Agency, Oct. 30, 2014, <http://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/how-one-cardinal-proposes-to-correct-ignorance-of-marriages-nature-97533/>.

<sup>2</sup>Ladislav Orsy, *The Church: Learning and Teaching* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, 1987), 85-86.

Ethical Relation to the World.”<sup>3</sup> For Catholics, of course, the contraception question was particularly vexing. With *HV*'s reaffirmation of *Casti connubii*'s prohibitions, but still faced with the growing gap between church teaching and actual individual practice, theologians and bishops provided a variety of responses.<sup>4</sup> It was here that the law of gradualness emerged. So, for instance, in September, 1968, the Italian Bishops' Conference stated that “The Church, whose task it is to declare the total and perfect goodness, is not unaware that there are laws of growth in goodness, and at times one passes through stages still imperfect, although with the aim of loyally overcoming them in a constant effort toward the ideal.”<sup>5</sup> James Keenan adds that in this period, the law of gradualness began to be invoked in confessionals, as Catholics recognized the rightness and authority of *HV* but acknowledged their own failures to live up to this ideal.<sup>6</sup> Born out of a deep realization of the messiness of human reality, a dynamic anthropology undergirded the worth of striving towards moral ideals.

Discussion of gradualness would become explicit at the 1980 synod on the family. In the first week, a key tension emerged concerning how gaps between conjugal practice and church teaching should be approached — from a classicist or personalist perspective, deductively or inductively, doctrinally or pastorally. Eventually, a middle third position emerged, originally introduced by Pedro Arrupe. In an intervention, he contended that “pastoral action must be characterized by ‘humanity’ and ‘gradualness,’ and in the ‘maximum respect for [the person].’ . . . In the more serious cases, ‘longer periods’ might be necessary to follow ‘patiently’ and with

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<sup>3</sup> Helmut Thielicke, *Theological Ethics*, Vol. 1, *Foundations*, ed. William H. Lazareth (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 482-577.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Peter Chirico, “Tension, Morality, and Birth Control,” *Theological Studies* 28 (1967): 258-285.

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Jan Grootaers and Joseph A. Sellings, *The 1980 Synod of Bishops “On the Role of the Family”: An Exposition of the Event and an Analysis of Its Texts* (Leuven: Leuven University Press and Uitgeverij Peeters), 1983, 262, n. 135.

<sup>6</sup> James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum Books, 2010), 146-7

‘friendship,’ following Christ’s example.”<sup>7</sup> From mission territories, Fr. Joseph Hardy and Abp. Francis Arinze echoed the necessity of such an approach. Indeed, at the end of the first week, the relator of the synod, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, endorsed it for its worth as a middle position. As the Synod progressed, however, the term would inevitably become tied to the main issue of the time—the contraception question. And thus, in John Paul II’s consequent *Familiaris consortio* (*FC*), the only explicit use of the law of gradualness would be in section 34, which cautiously considered couples’ fidelity to *HV*, contrasting the law of gradualness with a “gradualness of law.”<sup>8</sup> As long as gradualness was associated with *HV*, this caution would persist. Despite its promise as a pastoral alternative, because of this caution and others, the term would be rarely again employed.<sup>9</sup> Gradualness seemed destined for the dustbin of a theological footnote as long as it was associated with *HV*.

This very briefly sets the scene for the most recent synod on the family in 2014, which saw gradualness expand beyond the confines of *HV*. Unbeknownst to many, Pope Francis had already implicitly invoked the law of gradualness in *Evangelii gaudium* (*EG*) 44 before the 2014 Synod.<sup>10</sup> Referencing *FC* 34, the section that had explicitly invoked the law, Francis exhorts that “pastors and the lay faithful who accompany their brothers and sisters in faith or on a journey of openness to God... need to accompany with mercy and patience the eventual stages of personal growth as these progressively occur.” Hence, “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.” Here, the law of gradualness tasks the

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<sup>7</sup> “Fourth Congregation of the Synod,” *L’Osservatore Romano*, Oct. 6, 1980, 8. The texts of speeches were not published; the Vatican press office released only summaries of them. I am quoting from these summaries.

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Familiaris consortio*, November 22, 1981, [http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/john\\_paul\\_ii/apost\\_exhortations/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_exh\\_19811122\\_familiaris-consortio\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_19811122_familiaris-consortio_en.html), 34.

<sup>9</sup> For a critique of its use, see Josef Fuchs, “The Law of Graduality and the Graduality of Law,” in *Christian Morality: The Word Becomes Flesh* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1986), 34.

<sup>10</sup> Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (Frederick, MD: Word Among Us Press, 2013), 44.

church with two responsibilities: first, to accompany growth, and second, to discern, recognize, and value the small, if not salvific, steps of this growth.

*EG* 171 provides another implicit invocation. Now Francis speaks of the “need for ‘a pedagogy which will introduce people step by step to the full appropriation of the mystery,’” since “reaching a level of maturity where individuals can make truly free and responsible decisions calls for much time and patience.” Only through prudence, understanding, patience, docility to the Spirit, and compassionate listening “can we enter on the paths of true growth and awaken a yearning for the Christian ideal: the desire to respond fully to God’s love and to bring to fruition what [God] has sown in our lives.” Gradualness necessitates a pedagogy of patience that awakens not absent but dormant “yearning[s] for the Christian ideal.” Listening, “more than simply hearing,” requires an openness to these seeds, ultimately an openness to the Spirit. Rather than being linked with *HV*, *EG*, itself a document on mission, implicitly considers gradualness as a principle of ecclesial mission and evangelization, the initial intentions of the 1980 Synod. This important shift provides the hermeneutical key for the 2014 Synod, after all officially titled “The Pastoral Challenges of the Family *in the Context of Evangelization*,” a point too often forgotten.

Accordingly, in the midterm report for this Synod, the law of gradualness was explicitly used four times, none of which are associated with *HV*.<sup>11</sup> This marked a true turning point for gradualness. Part II begins with the heading, “The Gaze upon Jesus and Gradualness in the History of Salvation.” This considers how “Jesus looked upon the women and the men he met with love and tenderness, accompanying their steps with patience and mercy, in proclaiming the demands of the Kingdom of God.” An initial look of love, not condemnation, prompts a patient accompaniment that imitates Christ’s own. The “law of gradualness” is “typical of pedagogy,”

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<sup>11</sup> Synod 2014, “Eleventh General Assembly: *Relatio post disceptationem* of the General Rapporteur, Card. Péter Erdő,” October 13, 2014, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/13/0751/03037.html>.

since “divine condescension always accompanies the path of humanity, directing it towards its new beginning, not without passing through the cross.”<sup>12</sup> Demands of the Kingdom and having to pass through the Cross require constant conversion and growth towards an end-point that is the Gospel of the Kingdom. Hence, given this initial lens of openness to find “seeds” for accompaniment, another invocation of the law of gradualness by the midterm report furthers its implications. The report relayed that “Some ask whether the sacramental fullness of marriage does not exclude the possibility of recognizing positive elements even the imperfect forms that may be found outside this nuptial situation, which are in any case ordered in relation to it.”<sup>13</sup> Thus, “following the expansive gaze of Christ... the Church turns respectfully to those who participate in her life in an incomplete and imperfect way, appreciating the positive values they contain rather than their limitations and shortcomings.”<sup>14</sup>

Once again, like Christ’s merciful gaze, the law of gradualness means an attentive orientation for mission to find “seeds of the Word,” and thus places mercy before judgment and appreciation before faultfinding. So too, like authentic dialogue and mission, does it necessitate being truly open and attentive to finding these seeds in unconventional places. In *imitatio Christi*, gradualness thus means an accompaniment that includes both an initial loving gaze and an ongoing call to growth and conversion. Finding seeds must complement, not replace, finding areas for growth. These two responsibilities—acceptance and calling for conversion—are inherently in tension. Unsurprisingly then, gradualness provoked substantial reservations amongst the language groups of the synod’s second week.<sup>15</sup> Concerns over gradualness weakening the call to ongoing conversion caused all explicit mention of gradualness to be

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<sup>12</sup> Synod 2014, “*Relatio post disceptationem*,” 12-14.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>15</sup> Synod 2014, “Twelfth General Congregation: *Relazioni dei Circoli Minori*,” October 16, 2014, <http://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/it/bollettino/pubblico/2014/10/16/0763/03042.html>.

dropped from the Synod's final report. Despite its omission, the vestiges of gradualness unquestionably remain.

And yet, once disentangled from the imbroglia that surrounds *HV*, the law of gradualness beautifully expresses the challenging task and spirituality for the task of evangelization. It is Pope Francis's fundamentally missiological hermeneutic for being church that has freed the law of gradualness to show its compelling beauty, a beauty that has so strongly captured the popular imagination. Of what does this beauty consist? From its very beginning, gradualness has realistically recognized the messiness of human reality. It approaches humanity and the world where they are, not where it wants them to be, cognizant of the anthropological, societal, and cultural potential for dynamic growth and transformation. This mindset is meant to mirror the divine pedagogy and condescension itself, which finds its fullest expression in Jesus Christ.<sup>16</sup> Derived from the grammar of Christ's own ministry, it entails firstly an encounter with God's eyes of tenderness, mercy, and love. Through solidarity, this personal encounter of love accompanies an ongoing conversion to the demands, beauty, and truth of the Gospel and Kingdom. Indeed, the encounter of the Incarnation and the conversion called for by the Cross's demands lead to the transformation of the Resurrection.

The law of gradualness thus requires an ecclesial lens of a dynamic hope. It is a hope that a merciful and authentic encounter with people where they actually are can prompt genuine conversion and growth. The church, as a sacrament missionary by its very nature, is dauntingly tasked to imitate this hope-filled logic. How authentically does it encounter people where they are? How open is it to finding workings of the Spirit beyond its own preconceived notions? Does it really accompany the world in deep solidarity, sharing its joys, hopes, grief, and anxieties?

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<sup>16</sup> See Christopher J. Ruddy, "Responses to Synod 2014: A Journey of Accompaniment," *America Magazine*, October, 27, 2014, <http://americamagazine.org/content/all-things/responses-synod-2014-journey-accompaniment>.

Does it continue to truly challenge all towards ongoing conversion to the Gospel? Does it reflect the beauty of the transformation of the Resurrection? Inevitably the church, as pilgrim, falls short of these ideals demanded by the *imitatio Christi* of gradualness. It cannot perfectly maintain the tension of the Incarnation and the Cross as Christ did. The church too is a dynamic—indeed, eschatological—spirit-filled reality called to ongoing conversion and growth.

Regardless of the law of gradualness's fate in the 2015 Synod, perhaps this is where the true radicality of gradualness lies. Far from exhausting God's grace, the church itself, a "sacrament of hope" in the world, is called to continually grow deeper towards the Gospel—the true goal of gradualness—all the while being patiently and mercifully guided by God.<sup>17</sup> Only through the continuing and deepening experience of its own encounter of mercy, accompaniment, growth, and transformation can the church itself share this hope-filled Good News with the world.

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<sup>17</sup> See Richard Lennan, "The Church as a Sacrament of Hope," *Theological Studies* 72 (2011): 247-74.