

The dangers of 'Proportionalism' in moral decision-making

By
Fr Paddy

There is a battle afoot during Pope Francis's pontificate. It concerns a struggle for dominance between two standpoints on Christian morality – proportionalism on the one hand, which judges acts by intention and consequences, and on the other hand the teaching powerfully expressed in St John Paul II's encyclical '*Veritatis Splendor*', in continuity with the tradition of the Church, that some acts are objectively sinful regardless of the situation.

How has this battle played itself out? To start with, Pope Francis's post-synodal apostolic exhortation '*Amoris Laetitia*' didn't go down very well in certain quarters of the Church, particularly among some high ranking clergy. There were firestorms about the possibility of the divorced and remarried (not sanctioned by the Church) being allowed to receive Holy Communion. Then there was the closing down of the Popular John Paul II Institute on Family Life in Rome and the firing of two of its more prominent faculty members and, in their place, the hiring of two moral theologians known to challenge the Church's teaching on contraception and homosexuality. Then there was the ultra-liberal Cardinal Marx of Germany (who had the ear of the Pope but not so much now) aiming to force a rethink on clerical celibacy and certain other important moral teachings. Pope Francis has, however, reiterated his full support for a celibate clergy. He also has discounted so-called 'gay marriage'.

The above thinking (although it's gone slightly off the boil) is without doubt underpinned by a brand of moral theology known as **proportionalism** which has held sway among many bishops and priests and some laity since the heady days of the nineteen sixties. Over these years the person in the pew has been fed on a diet of this stuff by and large. I would say this is the main reason why there's been such a massive fall-off in confessions and church attendance in general. We, priests need to wake up.

Proportionalism is a version of the moral life which is of the view that 'the end justifies the means' when it comes to moral problem-solving. So long as the moral actor has an overall good intention in deciding on a course of action, he can't be faulted. This could, of course, validate any action – even those which Sacred Scripture and the Church's perennial moral teaching have held to be intrinsically sinful.

Proportionalism flourished in most seminaries for at least three decades after Vatican II, especially in Europe and the States. It was very much part of the thinking behind the dissent from Pope Paul VI's encyclical '*Humanae Vitae*' and it quickly became clear the advocates of proportionalism could justify dissent on any major moral issue of the day.

Many of the present day bishops were schooled as seminarians in proportionalism. Not all embraced it but many did.

Some characteristics of **proportionalism** are as follows:

- 'I and only I decide what's right and wrong',
- the subjective trumps the objective,
- a good intention trumps intrinsic malice,
- situation ethics determines guilt or lack of it,
- no behaviour in itself is always wrong in all circumstances.

The people schooled in this view would often say that abortion, for instance, as a result of rape may be morally justified. You see where this is taking us.

St John Paul II, however, roughly 26 years ago responded to the basic tenets of proportionalism in his celebrated encyclical '*Veritatis Splendor*'. He rejected the notion of conscience being 'autonomous' when it comes to important moral choices and he refuted the proportionalists' soft stance on intrinsically evil acts.

Pope Benedict XVI has also been unrelenting in his critique of proportionalism, describing it as a moral theory which contradicts the very foundation of the Christian faith. He even says it's partly to blame for the clerical abuse crisis.

That said, **proportionalism** has had a broad appeal among post Vatican II Catholics, including quite a number of the clergy. It is part of the creeping secularism of our times even influencing the Church's stance on the objective moral order which has held sway for centuries. St Augustine wrote in his 'Confessions' that "wrong is wrong even though everyone is doing it, right is right even though nobody is doing it".

Yes, moral theology did need revamping after Vatican II and the Council itself recognised this. It was particularly keen to have the teaching of moral theology firmly rooted in Scripture. But most of the mainstream moral theology caved in to the cultural onslaught of the 1960s and it was at that time that **proportionalist** ideas began to take hold.

Although seminary students from roughly the nineties onwards became less enamoured with proportionalism, it continued to be taught in their moral theology classes albeit with less vigour. The theory of **proportionalism** is mostly adhered to today by an older generation of priests and bishops who, having been swayed by its charms, stubbornly cling on to it even though it's producing little fruit whilst at the same time rejecting the teaching of '*Veritatis Splendor*'. Young people today expect better leadership from the Church and they have a right to it.

It's not surprising that over the decades a certain narrative has arisen around proportionalism, contrasting its adherents with a caricature of its opponents as follows:

- **Adherents** of proportionalism are reasonable and balanced, **opponents** are rigid and extreme.

- **Proponents** employ sound moral discernment in order to understand the specific situation of the individual, **opponents do not.**
- **Proponents** are pastorally realistic and sensitive, **opponents not so much.**

Pope Francis has shown some sympathy for the above narrative. He's been exposed to the theory of proportionalism for most of his adult life. By and large so also was Saint John Paul II, but he didn't adhere to it despite living under authoritarian dictatorships such as fascism and communism.

The Amazonian Synod in Rome some time ago was imbued with proportionalist ideas and caused quite a stir within the church. The agenda there was pushed by some German bishops. But Pope Francis has distanced himself from some of their unorthodox views.

It may be dying a death but, having held sway for many decades within the Church, it will be slow to see off.