

**DISCERNMENT THROUGH THE LENS
OF AMORIS LAETITIA AND RICHARD GULA:
THE EFFECT OF A CROSS-READING**

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The publication of Amoris Laetitia (hereafter, AL), Chapter Eight, which deals with "accompaniment and discernment," has attracted the attention of many readers, to the point that it has been considered as the key to reading the entire exhortation. Several studies have shown that the idea of discernment in AL, regarding the issue of divorced and remarried people, brings a fresh wind which helps to avoid an "idealism" that judges marital situations and persons solely on the basis of conformity or non-compliance with the law. However, the aforementioned approach is criticized by other scholars for whom the object of discernment is not an "adaptation" to the customs (mores) of our time which would correspond to "laxity" and to the change of the doctrine of the Church. From the foregoing discussion, it results a confrontation which categorizes the protagonists into progressives and conservatives, thus preventing a serene and fruitful debate about the approach suggested in AL. To address this problem, several studies have attempted to elucidate or corroborate one of the positions. But it turns out that the source of "images" that form our convictions has not yet been inspected. We suggest a cross-reading of chapter eight of AL and Moral Discernment of Richard Gula, in order to produce a critical reflexive effect, and self-criticism regarding the factors that influence the perception of situations and values.

INTRODUCTION

In 2016, Pope Francis published the post-synodal apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (the joy of love). Chapter eight of this apostolic exhortation sets the tone and framework for the interpretation of the entire exhortation. From this point of view, it is essential for understanding the scope of the entire text. This chapter emphasizes on three key words: "to accompany, discern, and integrate fragility."¹ It is about the accompaniment and discernment of cases of divorced remarried people for their integration into the church. This option was at the heart of the debates sparked by *Amoris Laetitia* (hereafter, AL), classifying the protagonists into conservatives for whom the "doctrine of the church" cannot be altered in order to adapt to the world, and progressives who believe that this document comes at the right time, insofar as it takes into account the reality of couples.

This categorization, "conservative-progressive," does not make the discussion fruitful. Hence the question: is there any way out? How can the dialogue on discernment be made fruitful? Can Gula² help to find a way out of this problem?

Since the observer's perception depends on the "place" where he or she is located, there is a risk that he or she may not see the whole reality, and that certain situations may therefore be misunderstood. In this regard, it is important to inspect the places from where the situations are observed, to assess the value of the perception and the stated point of view, in order to avoid any random judgment. To do this, we propose a cross-reading of Richard Gula's "Moral Discernment" and Chapter Eight of AL in

¹ These three words are taken from the theme of graduality proposed in *Familiaris Consortio* 9: 34; see also *Amoris Laetitia* 295.

² Richard Gula is an American priest who belongs to the Company of Priests of Saint Sulpice. He teaches moral theology at Franciscan School of Theology, Berkely, CA. He is also known as a speaker and workshop presenter to clerics and educators. He has published several books, including: *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Catholic Morality*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989); *Moral Discernment*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997); *Just Ministry, Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2010).

order to produce a reflexive effect that would allow a fruitful dialogue on discernment.

To achieve this, we will, at first glance, place the discernment in its context, before approaching it at the pace of AL. Then, we will deal with Richard Gula on the places that determine and influence the approach to situations. Finally, we will close this study with some practical implications that could "authenticate" a meticulous and self-critical work of discernment.

THE MEANING OF "DISCERNMENT"

Discernment refers to the action of separating, of setting apart, particularly the operation by which one intellectually and morally distinguishes various objects of thought, such as good and evil, true and false. It is, indeed, an intellectual act that distinguishes the multiple aspects of an object, a situation, a problem.³ In this sense, the word discernment means to have a clear view of things or a right glance.

For the Ignatian tradition on which Pope Francis depends,⁴ God must get his place. If God has given intelligence and human freedom to humankind, it is because He must also take his place and discernment must ensure the encounter of two. The very structure of the Spiritual Exercises draws attention to the role of time: they take place in thirty days or four weeks, depending on the division of the exercises into four parts. Concerned about respecting the retreatant's personal time, Ignatius did have the idea that discernment, as he sees it, is carried out within a well-defined time frame.⁵

Human salvation is played out over time in two aspects: on the one hand, in the punctual decision of discernment are

³ See Roger Cantin, *Le discernement spirituel personnel et communautaire, dans Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne, suppléments*, 12 and 13, (1983):15; Christian, Poirier, *L'art du discernement des esprits dans la vie chrétienne*, (Paris: Editions Salvator, 2015), 14-15.

⁴ *Amoris Laetitia* 303.

⁵ See Jacques Lewis, "Le discernement spirituel selon saint Ignace de Loyola, Collection," *Studia* 12, BDD, (1961).

embodied the acts on which the judgment will be based; on the other hand, it is necessary to ensure the continuity of a life without interruption. "True" discernment is the one that makes it possible to seize the "opportune moment" (the *Kairos*) when the moment of human time meets and combines with the gift of grace. To use Pope Francis' expression: "time is greater than space."⁶ Time can thus become the place of grace: the right time. The "opportune moment" is the place of the encounter with God who comes to seek a person and a person who is in search of God. It is not a question of choosing "good" and renouncing "evil," but of discerning at what precise moment "good" becomes what God asks of a specific person. It is not a question of morality obeying the commandments but of God's mystical quest.⁷ This is the meaning that derives from the discernment initiated in AL.

For Richard Gula, discernment leads to harmony between faith and reason. Faith provides the perspective and framework for interpreting what is happening; reason helps to evaluate in depth the scope of moral experience and the study of multiple relationships and factors that constitute it.⁸ In Gula it is about moral and spiritual discernment, while AL prefers to use the term "pastoral discernment" instead of the expression "moral and spiritual discernment," yet the accents of spiritual discernment are very present in AL.⁹ What then makes AL so special?

THE HALLMARK (TOUCH) OF AMORIS LAETITIA

It is the tone that makes the music: a new note?

The very title of the exhortation "the joy of love" sets the "tone" that the text will adopt. Unlike the encyclical, "the joy of the Gospel" (*Evangelii Gaudium*), published on 24 November 2013,

⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, 222-225.

⁷ Mariette Canévet, *Le discernement spirituel à travers les âges*, (Paris : Cerf, 2014), 225.

⁸ Richard Gula, *Moral Discernment*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 52.

⁹ See AL, 300.

which uses the expression *Gaudium* to express joy, this exhortation uses the Latin word *Laetitia*. The word "*Gaudium*" refers generically to all the manifestations of (inner) joy related to events that can occur in the course of a personal and collective history, it is also happy news¹⁰; while *Laetitia* refers to joy in a more emotional way. It is like a visitor in the morning or in the evening who, when she or he invests the human heart, floods the person with sweetness (softness) and sets them in motion, *Laetitia* also evokes beauty, fertility and grace.¹¹ Joy is the trace of divine mercy in a person. AL is therefore a call to (for) hope in the "sweetness" and "strength" of love that is the foundation of families' experience.¹²

Indeed, the apostolic exhortation does not give new canonical laws applicable everywhere, it insists, however, that it is necessary to proceed to a personal and pastoral discernment of particular cases. The discernment will have to take into account "mitigating circumstances." This means that the standard remains a valid reference for all, but the relationship to this standard must be reviewed by considering that the standard is insufficient to grasp the particularity of all concrete situations and that it must not be transformed into "stones to throw at people's lives." The recognition of the conditioning and complexities of the action must also lead to better consideration of people's consciousness.¹³

Moreover, it appears that the law is not imposed a priori on the moral subject, but it is a source of objective inspiration for an eminently personal approach to decision-making. It therefore follows that in an objective situation of sin, for which the subject is not subjectively responsible, one can live by the grace of God and grow in the life of grace and in charity, receiving for this purpose the help of the Church.¹⁴ However, AL discourages considering a path of discernment in a number of cases, so as not to confuse the

¹⁰ Henri Goelzer, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français, nouvelle édition*, ed. Henri Legrand, (Paris : Librairie Garnier Frères, 1928), 296.

¹¹ Ibid. , 373.

¹² Philippe Bordeyne and Juan Carlos Scannone, *Divorcés remariés: ce qui change avec François*, (Paris : Salvator, 2017), 49-50.

¹³ See AL, 303, 304.

¹⁴ See Ibid., 305.

seriousness of the divorce and its misdeeds, such as a new union from the recent divorce, with all the consequences of suffering and confusion that affect children and entire families, or the situation of a person who has regularly failed to fulfill his or her family commitments. This is not the ideal that the Gospel proposes for marriage and family.¹⁵

The extent of past faults is partly measured by the effects that persist in the present, so that discernment about the past requires an appreciation of the current situation as a whole. There are therefore concrete conditions that do not allow one to act differently or make other decisions without committing a new fault.¹⁶

Therefore, it is not possible to say nowadays that all those who find themselves in a so-called "irregular" situation live in a situation of mortal sin, deprived of sanctifying grace.¹⁷ AL is therefore part of the perspective of the ethics of marriage from a personalistic perspective.¹⁸ It also lies in a "personalistic" anthropology in which a person oriented to God wavers between "good" and "better," and his or her choice is based on "absolute freedom," that of following what enlightened consciousness inspires: the discernment of "good" and the discernment of "the best" in a particular situation. With respect to remarried divorced persons, it is therefore a question of recognizing that the answer given to God at the moment perhaps does not objectively respond to all the general requirements of the Gospel, but it is a generous, sincere and honest answer, and discovering with some assurance that this answer is the gift of oneself that God himself asks for in

¹⁵ See *Ibid.*, 298.

¹⁶ See *Ibid.*, 302. It refers to the Catechism of the Catholic Church 1735 and 2352, where some elements have to be taken into account, among which are the psychological and social factors that may reduce or even eliminate freedom and thus the imputability of fault; See also *Evangelii Gaudium* 44.

¹⁷ See AL 301.

¹⁸ See Martin Buber, *Je et Tu*, (Paris : Aubier, 1969); Philippe Bordeyne, *Ethique du mariage : la vocation sociale de l'amour*, (Paris : Desclée de Brouwer, 2010), 40-60.

the midst of a concrete complexity of limitations, even if it does not yet fully achieve the objective ideal.¹⁹

A Synergistic work of the "faithful and pastors"²⁰

The discernment proposed by AL is both a personal and pastoral process. The personal dimension values the conscience of the faithful, empowered to respond as best as they can to the Gospel with their limits so that they can exercise their own discernment in situations where all models are broken.²¹ This vision is in line with the perspective of Saint Paul, who does not appeal to social morality or to the conformity of each person to external rules as Philo of Alexandria did, but rather to the characteristic presence in the human being of an inner consciousness, inscribed in the heart and which encourages each person to approve or blame himself in the secret of his own judgment.²² Yet, it must be recognized that this awareness, however legitimate, can be wrong. That is why it is important to better form consciousness and to rely on the spirit of God.²³ As long as the divine word is present, moral consciousness is enlightened; but as soon as it disappears, involuntary error has an immediate free path to return. This is why the exercise of conscience is associated with the prayer of those engaged in discernment, "clerics and the Christian faithful."²⁴

¹⁹ See Luigi M. Rulla, "Discernement des esprits et anthropologies chrétienne, dans Cahiers de spiritualité ignatienne." *Suppléments 3 :Préalables anthropologiques au discernement spirituel* (Québec : SPI, 1979): 15-20; See Mariette Canévet, *Le Discernement....*, 10-12 ; *Amoris Laetitia* 303.

²⁰ In Ignatian spirituality, there is a tradition of involving all retreatants in community discernment. See Orsy, Ladislas, "Toward a Theological Evaluation of Communal Discernment" in *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits*, V, October 1973.

²¹ AL 37.

²² See Valentin Nikiprowetzky, "La doctrine de l'elenchos chez Philon, ses résonnances philosophiques et sa portée religieuse", in *Actes du colloque national sur Philon d'Alexandrie*, ed. Philon d'Alexandrie, (Lyon: 1966, Paris: Editions du CNRS, 1967), 255-273.

²³ See AL 303.

²⁴ Bordeyne and Scannone, *Divorcés remariés....*, 61-62.

This is where the pastoral dimension of discernment comes in, which includes priests and bishops, as well as the lay faithful, as suggested by the 2015 Synod. In this regard, at the end of Chapter Eight, AL solemnly invites the faithful who are living in complicated situations to approach with confidence their pastors or other lay people who live in devotion to the Lord to talk with them.²⁵

This orientation corroborates the need, expressed by the synodal surveys and taken up by AL 244, for a diversity of states of life, skills and charisms to be associated with family pastoral care services for better prevention and care of the difficulties encountered by the faithful in the field of marriage, affectivity and family relations. For this reason, AL recommends that the training of pastoral workers be largely based on the help of educational psychologists, family doctors, social workers, lawyers.²⁶ It also calls for more than just doctrinal elements,²⁷ but that an open mind be cultivated in the Church to receive from psychology, sociology, sexology, as well as counseling.²⁸ However, AL warns that mutual questioning is to be expected, because it is a spiritual adventure, where the discovery of God's will can bring some surprises. The Pope invites us to listen with affection and serenity, with a sincere desire to enter into the heart of people's drama and to understand their point of view, to "help them" to live better and to recognize their place in the Church. It is therefore a question of combining pastoral of mercy with a refusal to accept easy solutions, since it is a question of maturing and therefore growing together, in the Church, in fidelity to the Lord.²⁹

Even if personal and pastoral discernment involves very important moral and pastoral considerations, it is essentially a spiritual discernment. It therefore concerns the personal

²⁵ See AL 312. This approach had already been developed in *Evangelii gaudium* 76, where pastoral agents are considered in a global way, from bishops to the humblest and hidden of ecclesial services.

²⁶ See *Ibid.* 204.

²⁷ See *Ibid.* 36.

²⁸ Bordeyne and Scannone, *Divorcés remariés*, 63.

²⁹ See AL, 305.

relationship with God as it is built in a living bond with the Church and in the availability to the spirit received at baptism.³⁰ Finally, AL opens an important window, that of penetrating the drama and questioning oneself. Since cultural influences are powerful conditioning factors. The approach suggested by Richard Gula seems relevant in this regard.

SOCIO-CULTURAL PLACES AS "PEDESTAL" FOR OBSERVATION

The socio-cultural environment conditions influences a perception, the way of thinking and making choices. A person observes and defines situations from the social context in which he or she finds himself or herself. To realize this, Richard Gula invites us to look at the surprise we felt when we first realized that the planet "earth"³¹ was blue, by looking at it from the moon. This indicates that it is difficult to be completely autonomous when making a moral choice because the surrounding social realities influence the meaning of values and virtues. Furthermore, the sense of values and moral virtues are acquired in the same way as the person learns a mother tongue, in particular by living with people who behave in a certain way, who speak a particular language. Interpersonal relationships have a major influence on the formation of values and virtues, thus establishing the limits within which freedom operates.³² Therefore, in the process of discernment, it appears that decisions and choices are informed and influenced by religious and non-religious social sources.

INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS SOURCES

The Bible is a source of inspiration that has greatly influenced moral life, through the Ten Commandments, the

³⁰ Ibid. 306.

³¹ See Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 57.

³² Ibid 58.

prophets, the parables and the radical words of Jesus.³³ The theme of "Covenant" has been one of the key images of ethics.³⁴ It communicates the idea that men and women constitute a people in solidarity and interdependent. It affirms that relationships must be based on freedom, motivated by love, respectful dignity of persons, and carried by mutual trust. As a result, love and fidelity become the primary virtues.³⁵ The theme of "creation" is also very influential. It sheds light on the specificity of human dignity as a being created in the image of God. It allows to understand that all creatures are related to each other and that humans are in total dependence on the creator who is the source of life. Understanding this connectivity and interdependence supports (sustains) ecological concerns.³⁶

Moreover, the words and actions of Jesus constitute the starting point of ethics for Christians. Jesus is considered as the "ultimate norm" of moral life, the paradigmatic figure to which everyone must turn to in order to discover what it means to be a person and what it means to live in a way that is fully open to God. From this conception, it follows that not thinking from the perspective of the history of Jesus constitutes a moral failure of great importance. To accept Jesus as the norm of moral life is to become his disciple, to imitate him.³⁷ However, such an approach runs the risk of falling into an exclusive fundamentalism that ignores anthropological and sociological realities.³⁸ That's what Gula point outs:

We must not confuse imitation with mimicry.
Mimicry replicates external behaviour. It asks, what
would Jesus do? Although this question is well

³³ Jeffrey Siker, *Scripture and Ethics, Twentieth century Portraits*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 33-39.

³⁴ See Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 60.

³⁵ See Georges, Habra, *Du discernement spirituel II*, (Liège : Imprimerie Buteneers, 1983), 135-142.

³⁶ See Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 60.

³⁷ See *Ibid.*, 60-61.

³⁸ See Thia Cooper, *A Christian Guide to Liberating Desire, Sex, Partnership, Work, and Reproduction*, (Minnesota: Saint Peter, 2018), 10-14.

intentioned, it is not the question that guides authentic imitation. It only opens us to another form of fundamentalism that wants to copy Jesus point for point. It fails to respect the historically conditioned nature both of Jesus as a first-century Palestinian Jew and of the biblical texts that reveal him to us... Authentic imitation is living in the spirit of Jesus. We ought to ask, how can we be as faithful in our obedience to God and in giving loving service to others in our days as Jesus was in his?... Jesus lived in a way that set people free. We must ask whether our relationships imitate his in the ways we influence others to become who they are and to use their gifts for the sake of the community.³⁹

In addition, the idea of conscience formation implies a call to look in the same direction, from the same point of view. This is what the Second Vatican Council implies when it speaks of the primacy of conscience in its relation to the teaching of the Church. It is a question of giving much attention to the sacred and "certain" teaching of the Church in the formation of the conscience of the Christian faithful.⁴⁰ It is, however, important that Christians take into account not only the teaching of the Church in their moral decisions, but also the social and psychological sciences. Gula believes that:

We trust the Church as a reliable guide of moral wisdom, and so we want to stretch our experience and vision of making the Gospel come alive. We listen to the teaching of the Church in the process of informing conscience and making a decision.

³⁹ Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 61-62.

⁴⁰ *Veritatis Splendor* 64. See also, *Declaration on Religious Freedom* 14. The first proposal to the Second Vatican Council was expressed in these terms: "their conscience must be formed according to the teaching of the Church." The deletion of "according to...", replaced by "attention to teaching..." indicates the encyclical's desire to affirm that under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the moral teaching of the magisterium carries a presumption and a weight of truth that no teacher, rightly, can claim to have.

While we insist that the loyal Catholic must include the teaching of the Church in the process of discernment, we do not mean to eliminate all other sources of knowledge and experience that good discernment requires, thus, the need for prudence informed by a fuller process of moral discernment.⁴¹

Which reminds us of AL 204's quotation. In short, nowadays, we are more aware of the historically conditioned character of the Bible. This calls for prudence when applying biblical images, themes and commandments to the present circumstances of our lives.

NON-RELIGIOUS SOURCES

Besides the religious sources, there are also other sectors that form the sense of value and virtues: the special relationship with family, friends, school, television, films, newspapers, books and music. All these have a character that most informs the conscience and influences choices and decisions. The person instinctively identifies with the community's way of thinking and acting. He internalizes moral imperatives by looking at and listening to what people admire and what they find unacceptable.⁴²

In Africa, for example, the doctor announces the consequences of a serious illness to the family and not to the patient. Elderly people are preferably cared for by family members, otherwise the family is considered irresponsible if they were unable to take care of their parents. The dignity of the elderly is also mentioned in this context when they are placed under the auspices of the elderly. This indicates the extent to which culturally rooted practices and attitudes determine choices. Communities of influence keep values alive.

In fact, everything that comes into contact with our five senses imprints images that influence the perception and the way we evaluate an object or a situation.

⁴¹ Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 64.

⁴² See *Ibid.*, , 58-60.

When we realize that living morally is not in the first instance about resolving conflicting values but about descriptive and interpretive skills of our character, then we will pay greater attention to the communities that provide images for shaping our vision and our values. To examine your vision and values, consider yourself in the centre of a series of circles. Each circle represents one of the communities in which you live such as family, Church, school, world of sports, professional associations,... Different communities may be placed closer to the centre for different issues because they have a greater influence on your perception and value of what is important to you.⁴³

In addition to that, there are (civil or religious) laws that also influence decisions. Laws are very important for the life of society. Faced with complexity and moral diversity, there is a strong call for clear laws and principles. Also, there is always the temptation to impose the law or principle in case there is a desperate demand for certainty and stability. But at the same time, as the value of laws and principles in moral life is affirmed, it is necessary to be aware of their function as guides through the process of discernment, of their "authoritarian" influence and of their limits as sources for making a decision. Indeed, since laws regulate the morality of public order, there is a tendency to easily believe that what is legal is moral. Laws must be at the service of justice and love. Unlike laws, "principles of love and justice" do not "sanction," they carry wisdom within them.⁴⁴ They are important because they help to interpret important aspects of the situation during moral discernment.

Therefore, in view of the complexity of situations and cultures, as well as the rapid development of society, it is important to understand well all the dimensions of a certain situation, and to distance ourselves from our observation sites before deciding on what best suits the situation under discernment. This involves

⁴³ Ibid., 66.

⁴⁴ See Ibid., 70-71.

confronting personal judgment with other realities, as well as the perception and experience of others, so that clarity emerges.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

Knowledge of God's call in the here and now cannot be grasped without a critical understanding of the circumstances surrounding the situation and the context in which the people involved are situated.

BENCHMARKS RELATED TO THE SITUATION

The idea that the protagonists of discernment have of what is happening affects their attitude and behaviour towards the situation to be discerned. The answer to the question what's going on? will lead the search for what to do about the issue. If the answer is evaluative such as "divorce and remarriage" or "polygamy," then we cannot go far, since we have already made a judgment about the morality of the action in question. However, if there has not been a moral evaluation of the action and there is a possibility of answering the question in a descriptive and morally neutral way such as, it is "a new love" or "they live in an inclusive and extensive love," then a window opens up for other questions that may discover the moral implications of the situation in question.⁴⁵ It is dangerous to first name someone's action in a common life as "polygamy," for example, before fully examining the context in which this situation occurred. As a result, the way in which what is happening is named inspires how to respond to it. This concerns also the burning issue of the recognition of polygamy, polyamory and homosexuality.⁴⁶

Once the situation has been identified, it is important to situate the event in time and space. The timing of the action is morally important if time is defined in an integral way to the action.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 76-79.

⁴⁶ Susannah Cornwall, *Un/familiar Theology: Reconceiving Sex, Reproduction and Generativity*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 49-51.

The moment when the action takes place is also significant if the location gives meaning to the action. For example, driving a car at 120 km per hour on a highway is different from driving 80 km per hour in a residential area.⁴⁷ A polygamy that results from the levirate⁴⁸ is also different from other forms of polygamy.

The levirate is considered as a kind of social justice and protection, as it allows the widow and widower to be in a relationship in order to take care the orphans. It fills the absence left by the deceased in the family.⁴⁹

What about some cases of polygamy, as long as a similarity can be established between polygamy itself and the situation of remarriage after divorce? Indeed, according to church tradition, a divorced person who remarries before his/her spouse's death, enters a polygamous union, since the conjugal bond remains until the death of one of two partners. Such a union is called: successive or serial polygamy, it has been placed at the same level as the case of a man who has more than one woman at the same time, which is called simultaneous polygamy.⁵⁰ Both types of "polygamy" are not likely to be assumed by God and marked by the sign of the relationship between Christ and the Church, that is, to have a sacramental meaning. However, AL admits that not all cases of divorce and remarriage can be placed on the same level. Regarding

⁴⁷ See Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 81.

⁴⁸ Nowadays, levirate is generally used in rural areas. In addition, since traditional polygyny is a very rare and almost non-existent phenomenon in modern Africa, only single women are proposed for the levirate, however, the proposed woman or man retains the right and freedom to withdraw as a candidate.

⁴⁹ For reasons of necessity, a brother of the deceased, although already married, is supposed to marry his sister-in-law, hence the name levirate, derived from the Latin word "*levir*" which means, brother-in-law, brother of the husband. See Legrand Henri, *Dictionnaire Latin-Français*, (Paris: Librairies Granier Frères, 1928), 381. The principle of leviratic unions is like that found in the Hebrew Bible: polygamy for reasons of necessity was practiced. It was better for a woman to enter the warmth of a polygamous union than to be in the loneliness and poverty of widowhood or celibacy as there was no social security as it is the case in developed societies (see Isaïe 4,1; 13,12. Genèse 38: 1-11, Ruth 4: 5-6; 13-21. Deutéronome 25: 5-10).

⁵⁰ See John Witte, *The Western Case for Monogamy Over Polygamy*, (New York: Cambridge Press, 2015), 31.

polygamy, it is not entitled to discernment of situations. The effects of this attitude are not even considered. Yet the effects of our actions often extend beyond the present time and space. Therefore,

Moral responsibility means that we ought to look as far into the future as we can to judge the impact of our behavior. A great moral failure is shortsightedness. We fail to look beyond the immediate good that we intend to the evil effects that we cause along with the good. Many of the effects of our actions are beyond our intentions. Even though we are not morally responsible for all effects, we are responsible for those we can and should foresee, even if we did not intend them. So, we ought to anticipate as many effects as possible.⁵¹

This implies an insightful look into the future and on the social consequences of decisions. It is a call to be realistic in order to avoid deficiency in moral reflection. Exploring other options requires a creative mind, a creative imagination that takes into consideration the person who is the moral subject of the discernment process.

PERSON-RELATED CONSIDERATIONS

The identification of the person as a moral subject is important. This is the person concerned by the situation. The identity and role of the person adds important dimensions to decisions. Morality is not primarily a question of action but a question of the person as an agent of action. As everyone is unique and different, identifying the person makes aware that what might be correct for one person is incorrect for another.⁵²

Emotions and intuitions give a first piece of information in the form of a hunch. It is, in fact, a first signal, and an initial and immediate reaction of the interpretation of the situation before

⁵¹ See Gula, *Moral Discernment*, 82.

⁵² See *Ibid.*, 80.

critical and evaluative reflection.⁵³ This premonition is the subject of socio-cultural education, which must be inspected at the same time as the image of the situation. The world is perceived through images, imagination defines what the person is and allows him/her to have clues to his/her moral character and master images that predominate over the imagination. This means that "reason" will only be convincing if it is relevant to the world of images used to interpret the experience.⁵⁴ Imagination is therefore the ability to build a moral world. It is about bringing the different aspects of the experience into a meaningful whole.

"Since what counts for us morally depends a great deal of what we see, the images that dominate our imaginations are powerful moral resources for deciding what to do... The major issue related to the ethical function of the imagination is what voices and traditions we allow to influence us.... Most of what we see does not lie in front of our eyes but behind them in the images that fill our imaginations. We do not come to any situation like a blank film in camera ready to record whatever is there. Our film has already been exposed to frameworks of meaning fashioned by the images we have inherited from our social world."⁵⁵

From this point of view, sociology considers that the one who controls the images has control over society.⁵⁶ It is therefore important to be critical of the dominant images in life, and of their origin. This means that, "vigilance" and "criticism" must be extended to the religious and non-religious sources of images, of what we see and of the places from which we look at them. In this regard, Susannah Cornwall analyses a "Christian conception" of sexuality that has been largely influenced by Jewish tradition and stoicism and the current of ambient thoughts.⁵⁷ Which often directs the gaze in the same direction.

⁵³ See Ibid., 89.

⁵⁴ See Ibid., 87-90.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 94-96.

⁵⁶ See Peter Weibel, "Le pouvoir des images: Des médias visuels aux médias sociaux," *Perspectives* 1, (2012): 5-7; Estelle Galbois, *Images du pouvoir et pouvoir de l'image: les médaillons-portraits miniatures des Lagistes*, (Bordeaux: Ausonius, 2018).

⁵⁷ See Susannah Cornwall, *Theology and Sexuality* (London: Scm Press), 2013, 8-11.

From the foregoing, it follows that establishing conditions before beginning discernment is both a refusal of self-criticism and a desire to persist in condemning certain situations (of remarried divorced persons) deprived of the possibility of being viewed differently. When discernment is realized in the Christian environment, prayer becomes indispensable. Prayer in discernment is an attentive attitude and a posture of openness to the presence of God that provides the space and time for the discernment process to take place.⁵⁸ It is a form of listening not only to what is happening inside the person, but also to what is happening outside the person in response to the situation in order to find the most appropriate moral response to the situation.

It is therefore important to acquire a deep critical sense, a moral, spiritual and psychological maturity that can awaken a critical self-awareness in order to avoid confusion between an authentic judgment of discernment with pre-established decisions and conceptions.

CONCLUSION

At the end of this reading of chapter eight of AL and Richard Gula's "Moral Discernment," it emerges that discernment must be realized in a dialogue between people, God, situation, space and time. However, when we say "dialogue," we mean an intelligible "interaction" that leads to a "meaning." Hence, the need to rely on various auxiliaries such as sociology, psychology, human wisdom and sensitivity, vital attention to God, charism and sustained critical sense. The essence of the critique is to question the foundation of one's convictions and images in order to attain a clear vision of the whole situation, to see to what extent the person who lives in such a situation can be assumed by God in his life, as long as there is a dialogue between the believer and this incarnated God who lives at the heart of universal history and at the heart of the history of each person, as Jesus says in the story of miraculous fishing: "go into deep water and throw your nets to catch fish,... be

⁵⁸ See Gula, *Moral Discernment...*, 98.

fearless, from now on you will catch men."⁵⁹ In this regard, it follows that even if discernment remains demanding in its spiritual and moral foundation, it is indeed an approach that must be proposed without restriction to all situations in their complexity.

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⁵⁹ *Evangile de Luc 5, 1-11.*