

Which Gradualism? Whose Relationships?

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The 2014 extraordinary meeting of the Synod of Bishops explicitly referenced gradualism three times in the Relatio post Disceptationem. Is this moral theology concept helpful for analyzing relationships? This question is more difficult than it first seems. One needs to first ask “which gradualism,” as the three references imply three different understandings: Gradualism as Growth in Holiness, Gradualism as Pastoral Practice, and Gradualism as Inclusivism. Second, one must ask “whose relationship” it can help. I turn to hookup culture as it is a ubiquitous phenomenon on college campuses. As only Gradualism as Inclusivism proves helpful in hookup culture, it has the best potential to help those pursuing good relationships that might not readily align with church teaching.

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IN the wake of the 2014 Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, one of my former students, now a journalist, sent me the following message:¹

It’s always heartening to see some good press directed towards a typically denigrated church. On the “gradualism” front, I’m not sure I see the path forward beyond the case of the never-before-married cohabitating heterosexual couple. The above couple could certainly be receptive to the church saying, “Here’s the good in your relationship, and here’s how it could be sacramentally better.” [But in other cases] like gay marriage, I’m honestly confused. It seems like the church’s new approach will be to say, “There is

¹ Zach Noble, Facebook message to author, January 16, 2015. Noble is a journalist and assistant editor for *The Blaze*, <http://www.theblaze.com>. The comment is used with permission.

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good within your relationship, but ultimately you need to stop having sex.” And that message is still a very harsh judgment, no matter how much love accompanies it. It’s a hard thing, is what I’m trying to say, and I can’t help but feel as if the current burst of good press is a blip, before people (understandably) go back to griping, “Catholics are all about controlling sex.”

My former student raised an important question: Is gradualism a helpful concept, especially when it comes to addressing relationships, sex, and marriage, in the contemporary world? Or is the concept merely stylistic, failing to address what is needed, and so leads “back to griping”? This question is more difficult than it first seems. In the midterm report (the *Relatio post Disceptationem*)² of the 2014 Synod, there were actually three different understandings of gradualism, but the final report (the *Relatio Synodi*)³ removed one of these understandings and carefully circumscribed a second. Thus, to see if gradualism can be helpful, one must first ask, which gradualism? In addition, the strengths and weaknesses of each type of gradualism depend upon the kind of relationship one is addressing. Thus, to see which gradualism might be helpful, one needs to ask whose relationships are under consideration.

In this article, I undertake both these tasks. First, I explore the three types of gradualism that emerge in the midterm report of the 2014 extraordinary meeting of the Synod of Bishops. Then, I apply each of these types to hookup culture, the environment facing most college students. Hookup culture is a useful test case as it has characteristics similar to many other situations people face in negotiating relationships today. If a type of gradualism can be serviceable to college students, it will likely be serviceable to many others. If no type of gradualism can handle relatively typical situations people face, it is a concept best left on the margins of the field.

I. Not One Gradualism but Three

Gradualism is an underdeveloped concept in theology. The *New Catholic Encyclopedia* has no entry for it. The concept is mentioned briefly in entries about missiology, the Americanism heresy, the care of homosexuals, and, obviously, the 1980 Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of

² Synod of Bishops 2014, Eleventh General Assembly, *Relatio post Disceptationem*, <http://nconline.org/news/vatican/relatio-post-disceptationem-2014-synod-bishops-family>.

³ Synod of Bishops 2014, Eleventh General Assembly, *Relatio Synodi*, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20141018_relatio-synodi-familia_en.html.

Bishops.⁴ Pope John Paul II referred to gradualism in *Familiaris Consortio* but cited his own previous usage in a homily for support.⁵ In his *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, James Keenan was able to cover the history of the concept before and after Pope John Paul II's usage in under five pages.⁶

In the midterm report of the 2014 Synod, there were three explicit references to gradualism. In section 13, the document referred to the "law of gradualness" and cited *Familiaris Consortio*, §34. In section 17, the document referenced "the principle of gradualness" and cited *Lumen Gentium*, §8. Finally, in section 47, the document again mentioned the "law of gradualness" but did not provide a citation. Instead, this last section applied gradualism to the debates surrounding admitting the divorced and remarried to communion.

Captured in this preliminary document are three views of gradualism, not one. The first and third usages are clearly acknowledged by a number of individuals and stem from the original text of *Familiaris Consortio*.⁷ There, one usage was looked upon favorably, and I refer to it as Gradualism as Growth in Holiness. The other, at least in its extreme version, is rejected. I term this Gradualism as Pastoral Practice. The usage in section 17 is a relatively recent phenomenon and seems to refer to a concept in ecclesiology and interreligious dialogue that was rarely, if ever, identified as gradualism. I term this Gradualism as Inclusivism.

⁴ *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 2nd ed. (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale, 2002), s.vv. "Synod of Bishops (Fifth General Assembly, 1980)," "McQuaid, Bernard John," "Missiology," and "Homosexuals, Pastoral Care of."

⁵ Pope John Paul II, *On the Role of the Christian Family for the Modern World (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. See note 95 to *Familiaris Consortio*, which cites Pope John Paul II, *Homily at the Close of the Sixth Synod of Bishops*, October 25, 1980, §8.

⁶ James Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 146–51.

⁷ See Josef Fuchs, *Christian Morality: The Word Becomes Flesh* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987), 33–37; Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 147; Thomas Reese, "Law of Graduality: Living with the Imperfect," *National Catholic Reporter*, October 31, 2014, <http://nconline.org/blogs/faith-and-justice/law-graduality-living-imperfect>; David Cloutier, "Gradualism and Holiness," *dotCommonweal*, October 13, 2014, <https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/blog/gradualism-and-holiness-o>.

Gradualism as Growth in Holiness

The midterm report first mentions the “law of gradualness” in section 13. The statement reads:

From the moment that the order of creation is determined by orientation towards Christ, it becomes necessary to distinguish without separating the various levels through which God communicates the grace of the covenant to humanity. Through the law of gradualness (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 34), typical of divine pedagogy, this means interpreting the nuptial covenant in terms of continuity and novelty, in the order of creation and in that of redemption.

It anchors its understanding of the “law of gradualness” in *Familiaris Consortio*, §34, perhaps the best-known reference to gradualism. Section 34 of *Familiaris Consortio* states:

Married people too are called upon to progress unceasingly in their moral life with the support of a sincere and active desire to gain ever better knowledge of the values enshrined in and fostered by the law of God. They must also be supported by an upright and generous willingness to embody these values in their concrete decisions. They cannot, however, look on the law as merely an ideal to be achieved in the future: They must consider it as a command of Christ the Lord to overcome difficulties with constancy. And so what is known as “the law of gradualness” or step-by-step advance cannot be identified with “gradualness of the law,” as if there were different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations.

This first meaning is Gradualism as Growth in Holiness. It has two parts. First, like all disciples of Christ, married couples are constantly to grow in their understanding and love of God. This growth is both a grace from God and the result of one’s own choices. Second, it is not possible to grow while rejecting any “command of Christ the Lord.” Couples must “overcome difficulties” to grow in holiness. According to the end of section 34, the “first” difficulty is not accepting the teachings of *Humanae Vitae* on sexuality.

The first part of Gradualism as Growth in Holiness easily fits within the church’s tradition. Christianity has long known that discipleship is a life of ongoing growth and conversion, a truth seen in countless sources, such as the lives of the twelve apostles, Theresa of Avila’s spirituality in the *Interior Castle*, and the theology of John Henry Newman in his *Development of Doctrine*. While Pope Francis does not explicitly use the phrase “law of gradualism” or cite *Familiaris Consortio*, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, §169, he discusses “growth in the Christian life” and how the church is called to accompany—his more frequently used word—people on their journey. To justify this, Pope

Francis cites (in note 133) *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 65, a. 3, ad 2, where charity is the principle that unites the moral virtues and overcomes hindrances to their advancement. The implication of his thinking is that the church's accompaniment of people in love helps them to advance in the Christian life. Similarly, one of the main themes running throughout *Lumen Fidei* (see §§35–38 in particular) is the idea that faith is the knowledge emerging in the midst of loving others and God. It is a gradual understanding, and, to support this, Pope Francis repeatedly cites Vatican II's *Dei Verbum*, which emphasizes the growing clarity of divine revelation as it progresses through the Bible and tradition.

The second aspect of Gradualism as Growth in Holiness presents few problems in relationship to church teachings. It assumes as its starting point embodiment of the church's teachings. It is meant for all disciples, including married couples, who have already committed themselves to the church's teachings and are already keeping these precepts. They are gradually trying to deepen their love, doing more than just what is required, and pursuing a greater perfection. Thus, this understanding of gradualism assumes current ecclesial norms as a starting point and so easily corresponds with previous church teachings.

This lack of controversy made it easy for the Synod of Bishops to retain this understanding of gradualism in its final report and also explains why the section in the final report containing it, section 13, received 174 out of 181, or 96 percent, of votes. The final report did, however, change the supporting reference from *Familiaris Consortio*, §34, to *Familiaris Consortio*, §9. The passage from *Familiaris Consortio*, §9, reads:

What is needed is a continuous, permanent conversion which, while requiring an interior detachment from every evil and an adherence to good in its fullness, is brought about concretely in steps which lead us ever forward. Thus a dynamic process develops, one which advances gradually with the progressive integration of the gifts of God and the demands of His definitive and absolute love in the entire personal and social life of man.

The original reference, in *Familiaris Consortio*, §34, linked gradualism to the controversies surrounding the reception of *Humanae Vitae*. The passage noted two types of gradualism, one acceptable and one not. The new reference separated gradualism from the discussion of *Humanae Vitae* but retained the key elements of Gradualism as Growth in Holiness. It noted that all Christians need lifelong growth that moves them toward God, a "permanent conversion," and builds upon the acceptance of church teachings, a required "interior detachment from every evil." Thus, *Familiaris Consortio*, §9,

retains the Gradualism as Growth in Holiness of §34 but removes the reference to the second understanding of gradualism, the one rejected by Pope John Paul II. What was this second understanding?

Gradualism as Pastoral Practice

As seen in the passage above from *Familiaris Consortio*, §34, Pope John Paul II speaks of a second type of gradualism that he categorizes as the “gradualness of law.” He understands this type as the belief that there are “different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situations.” This gradualness of law is clearly cast in a negative light, if not flatly rejected. This condemnation of the gradualness of law was a condemnation of the idea that *Humanae Vitae* was an ideal or aspiration, obtainable for some but not all. Pope John Paul II rejected this perspective and insisted that the church’s teaching was the norm for all married life, deviation from which was always wrong.

As Keenan notes in his *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century*, Pope John Paul II was responding to a particular position in moral theology that emerged in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*.⁸ For some time, confessors had been using a law of graduality. When people confessed a sin, the confessor would note the “objective” aspect of the sin but also evaluate the “subjective” guilt of the person. Any number of reasons might mitigate responsibility and thus exculpate the person.⁹ After *Humana Vitae*, this pastoral practice was frequently utilized when couples confessed to using contraception, and priests pardoned them based on their circumstances.¹⁰ This situation progressed such that moral theologians asked, if there is consistently no guilt in using contraception, is it truly sinful? As Keenan explains,

The distinction between objectively grave and subjectively non-culpable became less and less credible. Married couples began asking: should they be confessing as sinful something that they were less and less certain actually was sinful? And what about the confessor? Should he be insisting that married couples were objectively sinful because of their use of birth control, but subjectively not-culpable even though the couple was convinced in conscience that the action was not sinful *and* he believed them? To these questions, the revisionists argued that the problem was not the laity’s weakness but the narrowness of the specific teaching on birth control.¹¹

⁸ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 146–51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 148–49.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 147.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 149.

Pope John Paul II's condemnation of the "gradualness of law" seemed to have two immediate intentions. First was the intention to stop dissent from *Humanae Vitae's* teaching on contraception. Second, Pope John Paul II wanted to stop the larger questioning of church teachings that would relativize its binding nature.

Section 47 of the midterm report evokes an understanding of gradualism similar to this "gradualism of law" that was viewed suspiciously in *Familiaris Consortio*, §34, even though it does not reference it explicitly. The midterm report reads:

As to the possibility of partaking of the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, some synod fathers argued in favour of the present regulations because of their theological foundation, while others were in favour of a broader outlook with well-defined conditions, when dealing with situations that cannot be resolved without creating new injustices and suffering. For some, access to the sacraments might take place if preceded by a penitential practice—determined by the diocesan bishop—and a clear commitment in favour of the children. This would not be a possibility applied to all, but the fruit of a discernment...on a case-by-case basis, according to the law of gradualness, which takes into consideration the distinction between a state of sin, the state of grace and...extenuating circumstances.

The debate referenced here is the proposal made by Cardinal Kasper in *The Gospel of the Family* and opposed by Cardinal Burke and others in *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church*.¹² It sounds like an elaboration of Pope John Paul II's "different degrees or forms of precept in God's law for different individuals and situations." Moreover, it echoes Keenan's explanation of the "law of graduality" when he summarized the pastoral practice of confessors who "encouraged the laity to understand that gradually they would make the law a reality in their lives and that in the meantime the sacraments could accompany them along the journey."¹³

This type of gradualism poses difficulties. It is linked to prohibited pastoral responses to couples using contraception. It is also linked to homosexuality. The United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' *Always Our Children* encourages homosexual persons to strive for perfect love "gradually through

¹² See Walter Kasper, *The Gospel of the Family* (New York: Paulist Press, 2014); and Robert Dodaro, OSA, *Remaining in the Truth of Christ: Marriage and Communion in the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014).

¹³ Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology*, 147.

stages of moral growth” and cites *Familiar Consortio*, §34.¹⁴ Yet, this gradualism is a Gradualism of Growth in Holiness, which presupposes adherence to church teachings, and not a Gradualism as Pastoral Practice, which adapts teachings to people’s particular circumstances. *Always Our Children* cites the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s *Letter on the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, §12, to clarify that the gradualism requires chastity and adherence to church teachings, distinctive characteristics of Gradualism as Growth in Holiness.¹⁵ This is especially clear in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith’s Notification Regarding Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father Robert Nugent, SDS, which banned Sr. Gramick and Fr. Nugent from any pastoral work with homosexual persons because they did not clearly assent to “the intrinsic evil of homosexual acts and the objective disorder of the homosexual inclination.”¹⁶

The suspicion of Gradualism as Pastoral Practice is so deep that even popes are not immune to it. In an excerpt from his then-forthcoming book, *The Light of the World*,¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI said that a male prostitute using a condom might be making “a first step in the direction of a moralization, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants.” Along with countless other news sources, the *New York Times* ran an article that the pope had changed church teaching and allowed an opening for those dealing with AIDS to use condoms.¹⁸ This thought emerged so rapidly that the Vatican Press Office issued a clarification insisting that Pope Benedict’s comments did not change church teaching.¹⁹

¹⁴ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Always Our Children: A Pastoral Message to Parents of Homosexual Children and Suggestions for Pastoral Ministers* (1997), <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/homosexuality/always-our-children.cfm>.

¹⁵ See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons*, October 1, 1986, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19861001_homosexual-persons_en.html.

¹⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification Regarding Sister Jeannine Gramick, SSND, and Father Robert Nugent, SDS*, May 31, 1999, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19990531_gramick-nugent-notification_en.html.

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *The Light of the World: The Pope, the Church, and the Signs of the Times: A Conversation with Peter Seewald* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 19.

¹⁸ Rachel Donadio and Laurie Goodstein, “In Rare Cases, Pope Justifies Use of Condoms,” *New York Times*, November 21, 2010, A1.

¹⁹ See John Allen, “Vatican Statement on Benedict XVI and Condoms,” *National Catholic Reporter*, November 21, 2010, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/vatican-statement-benedict-xvi-and-condoms>.

While those using contraception and practicing homosexuality are the constituencies often under discussion, Gradualism as Pastoral Practice's scope includes any person not keeping the fullness of the church's teaching. Thus, it would include the 77 percent of people who view pornography monthly,²⁰ the approximately 20 percent of people who are unfaithful to their spouses,²¹ perpetrators of intimate partner assault (30 percent of women and 10 percent of men suffer from such assaults),²² the 72 percent of married couples who use contraception,²³ and the 90 percent of people who have sex before marriage.²⁴ I make this point for two reasons. First, while homosexual persons and married couples using contraception are those usually thought of in connection with Gradualism as Pastoral Practice, most Catholics would find themselves within its scope, as they deviate little from the statistics noted above.²⁵ Thus, because this gradualism would have widespread application, it cannot help but cause people to question church teachings. If so many of the faithful, indeed practically all of them, are not keeping the church's teachings, what does this mean for these teachings? Instead of reflecting the foundational nature of church teaching as in

²⁰ Pamela Paul, *Pornified: How Pornography Is Damaging Our Lives, Our Relationships, and Our Families* (New York: Henry Holt, 2005).

²¹ Kristen P. Mark, Erick Janssen, and Robin R. Milhausen, "Infidelity in Heterosexual Couples: Demographic, Interpersonal, and Personality-Related Predictors of Extradysadic Sex," *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 40, no. 5 (2011): 971–82.

²² National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, "Understanding Intimate Partner Violence: Fact Sheet 2014," <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/ipv-factsheet.pdf>.

²³ Rachel K. Jones and Joerg Dreweke, *Countering Conventional Wisdom: New Evidence on Religion and Contraceptive Use* (New York: Guttmacher Institute, 2011), 5. Although the Guttmacher Institute is controversial because of its advocacy of and origin in Planned Parenthood, these statistics on religion and contraception use are among those few available. In addition, most consider these numbers to be fairly accurate because (a) Catholics seem to use contraception at the same rates as everyone else, and (b) these are the rates for everyone else.

²⁴ Christian Smith, *Young Catholic America: Emerging Adults in, out of, and Gone from the Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 225–26.

²⁵ Of the studies noted, none indicated that religious affiliation made any difference. Religion has been known to have some effects on sexual behavior, but the effects are usually confined to a limited number of individuals with additional markers of religiosity. See Duane Alwin, Jacob Felson, Edward Walker, and Paula Tufis, "Measuring Religious Identities in Surveys," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 70, no. 4 (2006): 530–64; Michael McCullough and Brian Willoughby, "Religion, Self-Regulations, and Self-Control: Associations, Explanations, and Implications," *Psychological Bulletin* 135, no. 1 (2009): 69–93; and Tina Penhollow, Michael Young, and George Denny, "Impact of Personal and Organizational Religiosity on College Student Sexual Behavior," *American Journal of Health Studies* 27, no. 1 (2012): 13–22.

Gradualism as Growth in Holiness, this second approach to gradualism begins in an attempt to weigh individuals' culpability in the face of law but almost immediately moves to questioning the law itself. It follows the same trajectory that emerged among theologians and married couples after *Humanae Vitae* and that Pope John Paul II rejected in his statement about the "gradualness of law."

Section 47 of the midterm report appears as section 52 of the final report. The phrase "law of gradualness" does not appear. Instead, section 52 ends with a clear statement that what is being discussed is the possibility of admitting the divorced and remarried to communion under particular circumstances. Section 52 cites section 1735 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which lists factors that could diminish or even nullify culpability. The revision indicates that while some pastoral accommodations are possible in specific circumstances, the idea of calling into question the teaching itself was to be avoided.

Gradualism as Inclusivism

The third understanding of gradualism in the midterm report appears in section 17. It states:

In considering the principle of gradualness in the divine salvific plan, one asks what possibilities are given to married couples who experience the failure of their marriage, or rather how it is possible to offer them Christ's help through the ministry of the Church. In this respect, a significant hermeneutic key comes from the teaching of Vatican Council II, which, while it affirms that "although many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside of its visible structure...these elements, as gifts belonging to the Church of Christ, are forces impelling toward Catholic unity (*Lumen Gentium*, §8)."

The reference to *Lumen Gentium* is the first indication that one is dealing with a different kind of gradualism. This is not the gradualism rooted in disputes surrounding *Humanae Vitae* and referenced by Pope John Paul II in *Familiaris Consortio*. This section of the report cites *Lumen Gentium* and its ecclesiology that recognizes "elements" of the true church of Christ in other churches than the Catholic church. This connection is new. Rarely, if ever, do ecclesialogists refer to the position in *Lumen Gentium* as gradualism.

The connection to ecclesiology made in the midterm report does not end with *Lumen Gentium*. *Lumen Gentium* affected the church's understanding of its relationships to non-Christian religions, as seen in *Nostra Aetate*. *Nostra Aetate* condemns discrimination based on religion (§5) and calls Catholics to "recognize, preserve, and promote the good things, spiritual and moral,

as well as the socio-cultural values” in non-Christian religions (§2). While *Nostra Aetate* proclaims the distinctiveness of the gospel and insists on the church’s mandate to preach it, it also asserts there is truth in other religions. The result is that the church takes what is typically known as an inclusivist approach in relationship to other religions, an approach that both affirms the uniqueness of the gospel and acknowledges what is good and true in other religions.²⁶ This approach is a delicate balance because, on the one hand, the acknowledgment of truth or goodness in other religions runs the risk of relativism and, on the other hand, the affirmation of the gospel as a blessing for others runs the risk of a kind of colonialism.²⁷

It should not be too much of a surprise, then, in developing the idea of gradualism presented in section 17, which cited *Lumen Gentium*, §8, section 19 of the midterm report explicitly cites *Nostra Aetate* and likens interreligious dialogue to a kind of cohabitation, noting that by “looking at the human wisdom present in these [other religions], the Church learns how the family is universally considered as the necessary and fruitful form of human cohabitation.” The explanation of the gradualism mentioned in section 17 is further explained in section 22, which, again, indicates the possibility of goodness in relationships even though they are not sacramental marriages:

In this respect, a new dimension of today’s family pastoral [ministry] consists of accepting the reality of civil marriage and also cohabitation, taking into account the due differences. Indeed, when a union reaches a notable level of stability through a public bond, is characterized by deep affection, responsibility with regard to offspring, and capacity to withstand tests, it may be seen as a germ to be accompanied in development towards the sacrament of marriage.

This kind of gradualism seemed to be the source of most of the consternation and opposition. It implied that there was goodness in homosexual and

²⁶ For more technical definitions, see Paul Knitter, *No Other Name: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes toward the World Religions* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 123; Alan Race, *Christianity and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (London: SCM Press, 1983), 62–67; Wayne Teasdale, *Catholicism in Dialogue: Conversations across Traditions* (Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2004), 88–92.

²⁷ Congregation on the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church (Dominus Iesus)*, August 6, 2000, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html, can be read as a defense against relativism. Most of the critics felt it was a step backward to a kind of colonialism. See Matthew Dunn, “The CDF’s Declaration *Dominus Iesus* and Pope John Paul II,” *Louvain Studies* 36, no. 1 (2012): 46–75, for a summary of the critiques against *Dominus Iesus*.

cohabitating relationships (among others) that could be the “germ” that points toward sacramental marriage. The question frequently asked on blogs was, how can something intrinsically disordered be good?²⁸ The facile conclusion was that the church had changed its teachings.

In so many ways, the concerns over the midterm report replicated those voiced before the vote on *Nostra Aetate* at the Second Vatican Council. The worry then was that a positive statement on other religions, especially one on Judaism, would go against the teachings of the church.²⁹ In addition, a positive evaluation of other religions would strip missionary work of its motivation: why should people work toward converting others if what they believed was already good and true?³⁰ Thus, the fear was that *Nostra Aetate* would, in effect, be naming religions as true that were false and, in doing so, undermine long-standing teachings and practices of the church.

This fear did not win out. The vast majority of Council Fathers saw the need for dialogue between religions and recognized some goodness and truth in other religions. They were sharply aware of the Holocaust and rejected a theology of other religions that might lead to their persecution.³¹ In contrast to the fears, *Nostra Aetate* led neither to the rejection of church teachings nor to the abandonment of missionary work. The church has continued to reflect on its own theology in light of these conversations, as Pope John Paul II’s *Redemptoris Missio*, the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue’s *Dialogue and Proclamation*, and the writings of thinkers like Jacques Dupuis³² and Raimon Panikkar attest.³³ In addition, Pope John Paul II’s World Day of Prayer and the work of the Sant’Egidio Community and the Focolare Movement all point to the Catholic Church’s prominence in interreligious dialogue.³⁴ In other words, *Nostra Aetate*’s inclusivism has

²⁸ For a summary of both positive and negative reactions to the reports, see Michael Sean Winter, “Reactions to the Synod,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 15, 2014, <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/reactions-synod>.

²⁹ Mauro Velati, “Completing the Conciliar Agenda,” in *The History of Vatican II*, vol. 5, *The Council and the Transition: The Fourth Period and the End of the Council*, ed. Guiseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 213.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 214.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 217–18.

³² See Jacques Dupuis, SJ, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

³³ Raimon Panikkar, *The Intra-Religious Dialogue*, rev. ed. (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1999).

³⁴ See Edward Idris Cardinal Cassidy, “Nostra Aetate: The State of the Question,” *Ecumenism and Interreligious Dialogue, Rediscovering Vatican II* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 225–58, for a detailed account of this work in interreligious dialogue.

been a catalyst for the development of the church's own teachings and practice.

In the final report of the Synod of Bishops, the reference to gradualism in section 17 of the midterm report and its citation of *Lumen Gentium*, §8, have been removed. Section 17 and the related sections, 18–23, in the midterm report are found in sections 23–28 of the final report. These passages praise the witness of couples who keep the church's teachings (§23); note the church's awareness of "the weakness of many of her children who are struggling in their journey of faith" who still must overcome these difficulties (§24); indicate how the church "has the responsibility of helping" those civilly married, cohabitating, and divorced "understand the divine pedagogy" (§25); and express the church's "concern at the distrust of many young people in relation to a commitment in marriage" and the need to encourage them "to understand the Sacrament of Marriage" (§26). Section 27 restates section 22, quoted above. Section 28 of the final report expands section 23 of the midterm report and states that "the Church must accompany with attention and care the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and lost love, by restoring in them hope and confidence, like the 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." It concludes with a reference to John 8:1–11, the story of Jesus not condemning the woman caught in adultery but counseling her to sin no more. The emphasis has shifted from the good in different kinds of relationships to the need to be pastorally sensitive to couples' weakness, struggle, ignorance, fear, weakness (again), and sin. The Gradualism as Inclusivism has disappeared and been replaced by an approach that counsels compassion for the many failures of couples.

II. Hookup Culture

Do any of these types of gradualism help couples and families? To answer this question, I apply these three types of gradualism to hookup culture. Hookup culture has three characteristics shared by many others seeking relationships. Most college students (1) aspire to have happy, healthy, and stable marriages, (2) make choices at odds with church teachings, and (3) inhabit a culture where following church teachings makes it almost impossible to have relationships at all. To explain these characteristics, I need to nuance the typical understanding of hookup culture.

Hookup culture is typically known as a culture where college students have sexual interactions with another person without expectations of a

relationship. This physical encounter could range from kissing to intercourse but often leans closer to intercourse. The interaction is primarily characterized by a lack of commitment, by the assumption that those involved do not and should not know or care about each other. Finally, it is an environment where almost any behavior is acceptable.

While hookup culture is the dominant culture on most campuses, it is not the statistical norm. Most students are not hooking up. As Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker note in *Premarital Sex in America*, most students rarely hook up.³⁵ While somewhere between 60 and 80 percent of students hook up,³⁶ more than 70 percent are not aggressively hooking up, doing so only around once a year.³⁷ It is a small cohort of students, 28 percent is the best estimate, that hooks up ten or more times during college. Add to this that even when students do hook up, most are looking for a relationship.³⁸ In his survey of hookup culture, Justin Garcia found that “65 percent of women and 45 percent of men reported that they hoped their hookup encounter would become a committed relationship.”³⁹ In fact, 51 percent of women and 42 percent of men explicitly talked about relationships after hooking up.⁴⁰ The possibility of a relationship turns out to be one of the key motivations for hooking up.⁴¹

Hookup culture is, instead, a dominant narrative that coerces people into participation. Those students who most often hook up and advocate hooking up control the narrative. They are a small cohort of people who are typically white, wealthy, belong to fraternities or sororities, and attend elite schools.⁴² In other words, hookup culture is a class issue, where the upper class controls

³⁵ Mark Regnerus and Jeremy Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America: How Young Americans Meet, Mate, and Think about Marrying* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 105–6.

³⁶ Justin Garcia, Chris Reiber, Sean G. Massey, and Ann M. Merriwether, “Sexual HookUp Culture: A Review,” *Review of General Psychology* 16, no. 2 (2012): 163–64.

³⁷ Caroline Heldman and Lisa Wade, “Hook-Up Culture: Setting a New Research Agenda,” *Sexual Research Social Policy* 7 (2010): 324.

³⁸ See Robyn L. Fielder, Jennifer L. Walsh, Kate B. Carey, and Michael P. Carey, “Predictors of Sexual Hookups: A Theory-Based, Prospective Study of First-Year College Women,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 42 (2013): 1425–41; and Heldman and Wade, “Hook-Up Culture,” 323–33.

³⁹ Garcia et al., “Sexual HookUp Culture,” 167–68.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Heldman and Wade, “Hook-Up Culture,” 325.

⁴² Regnerus and Uecker, *Premarital Sex in America*, 104. Also see Jess Owen, Galena Rhoades, Scott Stanley, and Frank Fincham, “‘Hooking Up’ among College Students: Demographic and Psychosocial Correlates,” *Archives of Sexual Behavior* 39 (2010): 653–63.

the narrative affecting the middle and lower classes. Thus, hookup culture is an environment where one small group pressures others to participate. Given this coercive nature, it should not be too surprising that violence often accompanies hookup culture. According to the Centers for Disease Control, around 20 percent of dating relationships involve nonsexual violence, and 20 percent of women in college experience completed or attempted rape.⁴³ Eighty-five percent of their assailants are known, usually boyfriends, ex-boyfriends, or classmates. In addition to physical violence, there is also social violence. Resistance to hookup culture often results in a kind of social suicide.⁴⁴ Students are excluded from social gatherings where people meet and, thus, are hindered from having relationships. Hookup culture also marginalizes other options for meeting people and makes hooking up the only established way to do so. Alternatives might exist, but they exist only on the outskirts of the culture and are not broadly acknowledged.

In short, the problem with hookup culture is not just sex but also power. Hookup culture is an oligarchy, in which the preferences of a few control and coerce the many. It marginalizes most people's interest in relationships, any alternatives to hooking up, the middle and lower classes, and minorities. It punishes nonconformity with exclusion. It frequently involves physical coercion during hookups. In this context, students need some ways to name the coercion and exclusion as wrong and the freedom to find relationships in ways other than hooking up. Unfortunately, because of the dominance of hookup culture, many students think that the only path to a serious relationship is through it.

III. Which Gradualism Helps? What Relationships?

Is gradualism helpful for these types of situations? To negotiate hookup culture, students need some norms. They need norms prohibiting exclusion, marginalization, and coercion. They need the confidence to name assault as sinful, and so have support in stopping it. Absolute relativism and a tolerance that turns people into bystanders do not help. They enable people to continue with wrongs. Obviously, what one names as right and wrong is important. In hookup culture, norms proscribing classism, oppression, and violence are essential.

⁴³ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Understanding Sexual Violence," <http://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/pdf/sv-factsheet.pdf>.

⁴⁴ Donna Freitas, *The End of Sex: How Hookup Culture Is Leaving a Generation Unhappy, Sexually Unfulfilled, and Confused about Intimacy* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 70–73.

All three types of gradualism retain norms that can be helpful. All three can draw upon resources in the Catholic tradition, particularly Catholic social teaching, which insists on the dignity of the person and opposes structural elements that foster a disregard for this dignity. With these norms, all three types of gradualism can help people negotiate some of the ambiguities of this cultural situation. Hookup culture is not alone in this need to support and protect human dignity. Domestic violence is all too prominent in marriages and cohabitating relationships. Homosexual persons often experience discrimination and marginalization. A rise in the rate of divorce often coincides with a decrease in domestic violence, as often those going through divorces or separations are protecting themselves from violence.⁴⁵ Thus, almost every relationship needs guidance from norms in order to name and resist manifest evils, and any of the three understandings of gradualism can be helpful in this regard.

Having norms is not enough, however. The cultural context makes it very difficult to act well. Even if college students are able to understand and critique the cultural dynamics sufficiently and have the self-confidence to resist the culture, the result is often loneliness and social isolation. The prospects for finding relationships greatly diminish. Most students want good healthy relationships, but the only route to them is through hookup culture. Students play the game but consistently cheat at it, hooking up to find relationships. It is easy to condemn the predators that exploit this culture to take advantage of people, and to praise those with heroic virtue who are able to stand against it. What does one do with the vast majority of people in between, who want relationships but have few ways of pursuing them except through hookup culture?

Gradualism as Pastoral Practice seems to fail most students. If Gradualism as Pastoral Practice leads to questioning of church teachings, this can easily undermine the norms needed to support one's own and others' dignity. If Gradualism as Pastoral Practice restricts itself to evaluating culpability, then it can come across as condemning or judging. When students try to do what is good in a culture stacked against their own desires, declaring that their choices are sinful fails. It is why, I think, students often complain that the church's teachings are out-of-date. It is not that they reject the idea of loving, happy marriages; rather they feel that what the church says seems impractical given the situations most of them face. The teachings of the church seem so undeveloped as to be irrelevant. As a result, most students ignore

⁴⁵ See Betsy Stevenson and Justin Wolfers, "Bargaining in the Shadow of the Law: Divorce Laws and Family Distress," *Quarterly Journal of Economics* 121, no. 1 (2006): 267-88.

anything the faith might have to offer.⁴⁶ This response is not unique to hookup culture. Those cohabiting, using contraception, participating in homosexual relationships, and suffering from divorce too often feel like they are being judged negatively when they have been trying to do what they believe is good in their circumstances, and so, they tune out church teachings.

Gradualism as Growth in Holiness and Gradualism as Inclusivism both tend to affirm those struggling to do what is good and right. The problem with Gradualism as Growth in Holiness, however, is that it assumes conformity to church teachings. I do not mean this as a problem regarding church teachings per se. It is just that even those highly committed to church teachings often struggle to live up to them, and so Gradualism as Growth in Holiness becomes an ideal at best. While this is true in hookup culture, it is not a problem unique to it. Many couples are committed to church teachings and yet still struggle to live up to the Catholic church's teaching on marriage and sexuality. To use an extreme example of how Gradualism as Growth in Holiness readily lifts off from the circumstances of relationships, the wife of a close friend of mine told him one day that she wanted a divorce. Her reasons were neither money nor infidelity nor abuse. She just wanted a different life. It was not an acrimonious split, as she stayed in the basement of their house while she worked to save enough money to find her own place. In one of our correspondences, my friend wrote:

I feel selfish impulses too. Obviously you have not yet received the annulment paperwork...nor have I pushed for it yet. I know...stop using my judgment and let the Church judge. But there is a big piece of me that feels like I am lying to claim that 14 years of union that resulted in three kids had a defect in assent and therefore never existed. Again, it may have, but it feels like legalism. Plus I run out of money between every single pay check; I don't have \$400 (a month of food bills) to pay the diocese on speculation that their canon lawyers *might* determine that my marriage did not exist. I truly believe Christ died on the Cross for us as a perfect Passover sacrifice for our ransom, and that he commissioned the Apostles as our first bishops and gave them the power to set the rules (the Gospels say as much). But as I go from day to day, I don't think of theology, or canon law, or even the Church.⁴⁷

Here is someone who accepts all that the church teaches and wants to grow toward Christ. Yet, he finds himself unable to adhere to church teachings

⁴⁶ See Smith, *Young Catholic America*, 113–17, on how students typically ignore, but rarely outright reject, church teachings.

⁴⁷ Anonymous, Facebook message to author, October 15, 2014. This comment is used with permission.

because his wife left him, he cannot afford the decree of annulment, and he wants to be faithful to his conscience. He is similar to students striving to find good, healthy relationships, seeing no way forward, and finding that following church teachings isolates them even further. If Gradualism as Growth in Holiness cannot address students trying to negotiate hookup culture in hopes of a relationship and cannot help someone committed to the church's teachings, I am not sure how helpful it will be to most people. It is an approach, I worry, that begins too far removed from the vagaries of relationships and married life.

Gradualism as Inclusivism has the best possibility of helping. First, it would name the violence, assault, and coercion that too often accompany hookup culture as wrong. This is a resource that students could find helpful. Often those whose actions meet the legal definition of rape do not believe it to be rape, and those who are raped often do not recognize it as such.⁴⁸ Moreover, even when victims do identify an incident as rape, they frequently do not report it.⁴⁹ Beyond this, the norms that are part of Gradualism as Inclusivism would also provide a resource for students who feel on the outside of hookup culture—because of either their own choices not to participate or their marginalization by those who control hookup culture—to name this experience, acknowledge their situation, and so, in this self-awareness, have a good chance to change it.

Second, Gradualism as Inclusivism could also help students name and value their desire for sex to be embedded in relationships, their desire for it to be meaningful.⁵⁰ This desire overlaps with the Catholic Church's teaching that sex is inherently unitive. While this is not the whole of the church's teaching on sexuality, it is a clear aspect of it and one that connects with what students want and pursue. By making this connection and affirming this relational end of sex as something good, the church's teaching provides additional weight to students' desires. The teaching affirms their experience as good and, in doing so, can encourage them to pursue relationships and meaningful sexual activity more confidently.

⁴⁸ See Arnold S. Kahn, "What College Women Do and Do Not Experience as Rape," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 28 (2004): 9–15; and Ruth Mann and Clive Hollin, "Sexual Offenders' Explanation for Their Offending," *Journal of Sexual Aggression* 13, no. 1 (March 2007): 3–9.

⁴⁹ Michael Planty and Christopher Krebs, "Female Victims of Sexual Violence, 1994–2010," U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics (March 2013), 6, <http://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/fvsv9410.pdf>.

⁵⁰ See Garcia et al., "Sexual HookUp Culture," 167–68; and Heldman and Wade, "Hook-Up Culture," 325.

While some might believe that this affirmation of sex in a relationship would relativize the Catholic Church's teaching that a sexual relationship should only be a marital one, the reception of *Nostra Aetate* indicates otherwise. The inclusivism of *Nostra Aetate* created bridges between the Catholic Church and other religions, fostering greater dialogue and cooperation. For students and hookup culture, this would suggest that Gradualism as Inclusivism would open up a conversation between students and the Catholic Church. It would make the resources of the Catholic Church—in this case the stance against assault and for the relational end of sex—more available and useful for students. Moreover, if students found in these teachings something that spoke to their experiences and desires, they might be inclined to pursue them even further. Instead of ignoring church teachings, students might explore them more fully.

In addition, just as the inclusivism of *Nostra Aetate* developed the Catholic Church's own ecclesiology and understanding of interreligious dialogue, so too a Gradualism as Inclusivism approach to hookup culture would suggest development in the Catholic Church's sexual teaching. Development would not necessarily entail a rejection of what the church has taught before, but it would mean going beyond the discussion of the procreative and unitive ends of sex. While it is difficult to know a priori the needed and authentic development of church teachings,⁵¹ there are some lines of thought about hookup culture that suggest the form that such development might take. Donna Freitas' work provides a rich description of how hookup culture operates and how this culture shapes students' understanding of the "ends" of sex.⁵² Freitas' awareness of the interplay between social context and individual choices allows her to critique where the culture is coercive and indicate how alternatives to it can develop. Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman builds upon this work to examine those factors in hookup culture that work against good relationships, and those factors—like notions of justice and romance—that might foster good relationships.⁵³ Conor Kelly's article "Sexism in Practice: Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture" suggests

⁵¹ For why this is and possible ways forward, see Terrence Tilley, *Inventing Catholic Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

⁵² Freitas, *The End of Sex*, as well as Freitas, *Sex and the Soul: Juggling Sexuality, Spirituality, Romance, and Religion on America's College Campuses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁵³ Kari-Shane Davis Zimmerman, "In Control? The Hookup Culture and the Practice of Relationships," in *Leaving and Coming Home: New Wineskins for Catholic Sexual Ethics*, ed. David Cloutier (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 47–61; and Davis-Zimmerman, "Hooking Up: Sex, Theology, and Today's 'Unhooked' Dating Practices," *Horizons* 37, no. 1 (2010): 72–91.

ways to overcome the sexism found in hookup culture.⁵⁴ In “Hookup Culture as Rape Culture: A Shared Complicity” and “Create in Me a Just Heart: Treating Pornography as Structural Sin,” Megan McCabe discusses how violence is normalized in hookup culture and how this violence is not just a personal sin but also a social one.⁵⁵

Of course, these studies do not suggest the only possibilities for the development of church teachings, but they do indicate how bringing the church’s teachings into conversation with hookup culture can lead to such development. These scholars suggest an expansion of the Catholic Church’s sexual ethics from a narrow focus on the act of sex itself to how relationships and communities shape and give meaning to sexual activity. While these scholars clearly focus on how social elements can be destructive of people and sexual activity, they all work toward considering how goodness and love might be fostered within the contexts of relationships and communities, or, to use the terms of Catholic moral theology, these authors work on how the unitive aspect of sex might be fostered in relationships and communities.

So which gradualism? Whose relationships? I worry that both Gradualism as Growth in Holiness and Gradualism as Pastoral Practice are inadequate. Gradualism as Growth in Holiness applies to too few people, if any at all, because it presumes conformity to church teachings. Gradualism as Pastoral Practice fails to account for the goodness in people’s relationships, assuming sin even if it does not assume culpability. Both lead, I believe, to the kind of resentment toward the church that my former student worried about and the dismissal of church teachings that Pope John Paul II worried about. Of them all, Gradualism as Inclusivism has the best possibility of responding to the needs and hopes of people. It can engage and affirm people’s experiences, draw upon the teachings of the Catholic Church, and develop its understanding so as to support relationships in the contemporary world. Gradualism as Inclusivism has the best chance of providing genuine help for the vast majority of people who aspire to have happy, healthy relationships but find themselves in situations that do not readily align with church teachings.

⁵⁴ Conor Kelly, “Sexism in Practice: Feminist Ethics Evaluating the Hookup Culture,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 2 (September 2012): 27–48.

⁵⁵ Megan McCabe, “Hookup Culture as Rape Culture: A Shared Complicity,” *Daily Theology*, <http://dailytheology.org/2015/09/15/hookup-culture-as-rape-culture-a-shared-complicity/>; and McCabe, “Create in Me a Just Heart: Treating Pornography as Structural Sin,” *America: The National Catholic Review*, February 8, 2016, <http://americamagazine.org/issue/create-me-just-heart>.