

BECOME LOVE

**Gradual Growth and Transformation
From John to Francis**

Larry Kaufmann CSsR

Foreword by Francis J. Moloney SDB



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COVER PIC: Eagle in flight by Sam Bark on [Unsplash.com](https://unsplash.com)

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The eagle is a traditional symbol for Saint John the Evangelist. The eagle is known for grace, strength, keenness of vision and powers of flight above all creatures. So is John among the scriptural authors, soaring to heaven proclaiming a gospel of love.

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DEDICATION

To the memory of Brian Gaybba

Theologian

Teacher

Friend of God

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With Gratitude



POPE FRANCIS AND “THE LAW OF GRADUALNESS”

Introduction

There is a wonderful anecdote about Pope Francis visiting his optician in Rome. Emerging from the forty five-minute appointment he faced a crowd of people who had gathered in anticipation of seeing him. When asked how the appointment went, the pope replied: “My optician says I need new lenses. But I’m going to keep the same frames.”

Vatican watchers like Robert Mickens have speculated that in making such a statement between the Synod on the Family and his subsequent apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* (*The Joy of Love*), Pope Francis was offering us an insight into his papal ministry: he is not meddling with the Church’s fundamental doctrine (the “same frames”) but is urging us to see things through a new lens, the lens of mercy.

Pope Francis’ emphasis on mercy has been a hallmark of his papacy: “Mercy” as a name for God; the call for Christians to be “merciful like the Father”; the proclamation of the 2016 jubilee “Year of Mercy”. Many words and gestures of Pope Francis have led to a title given him as “the pope of mercy”.

Mercy means nothing if it is not translated into action and mindset, into policy and pastoral praxis. One of the phrases used in *Amoris Laetitia* to translate mercy is “the law of gradualness”, a phrase Pope Francis borrows from Pope John Paul II in his *Familiaris Consortio* (FC) of 1981. It is

worth, therefore, calling to mind what John Paul II himself said about this.

Linking the Church's teaching methods to her doctrines, John Paul II asserts that "a wise pedagogy will always uphold all the human conditions – psychological, moral and spiritual – indispensable for understanding and living the moral value and norm" (FC33). This statement is significant. While Pope John Paul II faithfully upholds objective doctrine, he nevertheless acknowledges the need for wisdom and realism when it comes to the conditions necessary for teaching and learning to take place. We need to be realistic, says Pope John Paul II, because people are historical beings "who day by day build themselves up through many free decisions". Human beings know, love and accomplish moral good "*by stages of growth*" (FC 34 – my own emphasis).

Examining "stages of growth" is what this book is all about, with its main section being the narratives of various characters in John's Gospel demonstrating in their own lives the process of gradual transformation.

For Pope John Paul II, the law of gradualness is part of the human condition. It is about the *way* humans learn, understand and progress intellectually, morally, psychologically, and spiritually. This, he says, is "not to 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" (FC 34). Rather, this "law" simply refers to the way human beings are and how they grow. John Paul adds that "this requires much patience, understanding and time".

In that final phrase you have the primary characteristics of the law of gradualness: "patience, understanding and time". These qualities, as we will see, are evident in Jesus' interactions with various characters in John's gospel. Pope Francis reflects the mind and attitude of Jesus in this respect. His own pedagogy is modelled on that of Jesus. In other

words, Pope Francis emulates the way Jesus led his disciples, the way he taught and instructed them. The “teaching” of Jesus is not only a noun; it is also a verb.

Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* is replete with this pedagogy through its frequent allusions to the principle of gradual growth and transformation. By examining this document now, we will have a better grasp of the interpretive key we shall be using in unlocking the door to the pedagogy of John’s Gospel.

Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*

1. Preliminary observations

It is in Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia* (AL) where Pope Francis quotes his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, on “the law of gradualness”. Chapter Eight will in due course receive the attention that is its due. However, as has been mentioned, there are in the document frequent allusions to the concept of gradualness, albeit sometimes indirectly. Many statements of Pope Francis *imply* gradualness in moral and spiritual development. His aim in writing *Amoris Laetitia*, as stated in AL 4, is a case in point. The Pope offers his exhortation, he says, as “an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges” – all of which requires respect for process.

Furthermore, while Pope Francis rejects “an attitude that would solve everything by applying general rules” (AL 2), at the same time he acknowledges that unity of teaching in the Church “does not preclude various ways of *interpreting* some aspects of that teaching or drawing certain consequences from it” (AL 3). He then goes on to describe the work of the Holy Spirit who guides us step by step, quoting the very verse that will receive special attention later in this book:

Interpretation will always be the case as the *Spirit*

guides us towards the entire truth (Jn 16:13), until he leads us fully into the mystery of Christ and enables us to see all things as he does (AL 3).

Another allusion to the law of gradualness, but this time with reference to its very absence, is found in AL 36, where Pope Francis admits the Church's *failure* to respect the gradual process of learning in people.

We also need to be humble and realistic, acknowledging that at times *the way we present our Christian beliefs and treat other people has helped contribute to today's problematic situation. We need a healthy dose of self-criticism. ... Nor have we always provided solid guidance to young married couples, understanding their timetables, their way of thinking and their concrete concerns. At times we have also proposed a far too abstract and almost artificial theological ideal of marriage, far removed from the concrete situations and practical possibilities of real families.* (AL 36. Emphases added).

What could "presenting of beliefs in an artificial or abstract way", and "understanding of people's timetables and way of thinking" mean to Pope Francis if not his sensitivity to the gradual process of maturation in faith? "Grace builds on nature" is one of the tried and tested maxims of the Church's wisdom.

There are other allusions to the law of gradualness in *Amoris Laetitia* prior to its fuller development in Chapter Eight. Among these, the reference to conscience is the most important. What Pope Francis says in *Amoris Laetitia* paragraph 37, on the *formation* of conscience, is particularly pertinent to our study.

We have long thought that simply by stressing doctrinal, bioethical and moral issues, without encouraging openness to grace, we were providing

sufficient support to families, strengthening the marriage bond and giving meaning to marital life.... We also find it hard to make room for the consciences of the faithful, who very often respond as best they can to the Gospel amid their limitations and are capable of carrying out their own discernment in complex situations.

He ends paragraph 37 with words that are now frequently quoted:

We have been called to form consciences, not replace them.

In a certain sense our own aim in linking the pedagogy of Jesus in John's Gospel to the law of gradualness as espoused by Pope Francis, is to offer a paradigm for the formation of conscience. To put it another way, in the formation of conscience the Church can do no better than emulate Jesus' own approach in John's Gospel!

In *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis remarks how people sometimes feel that the Church's message

...does not clearly reflect the preaching and attitudes of Jesus, who set forth a demanding ideal, yet never failed to show compassion and closeness to the frailty of individuals like the Samaritan woman or the woman caught in adultery (AL38).

Mention by Pope Francis of both these characters in John's gospel is fortuitous. We will get to know more about them in due course.

Happily, in terms of our own aim, Pope Francis uses the word "pedagogy" in *Amoris Laetitia*, relating it specifically to the image of Light which Jesus is claimed to be in John's Prologue. The pope sees divine Light reflected in the merciful eyes of Jesus which, he says, is a manifestation of the "divine

pedagogy". It is through the lens of divine pedagogy, he adds, that the Church will find a way forward for people.

The light of Christ enlightens every person (cf. *Jn* 1:9; *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Seeing things with the eyes of Christ inspires the Church's pastoral care for the faithful who are living together, or are only married civilly, or are divorced and remarried. *Following this divine pedagogy*, the Church turns with love to those who participate in her life in an imperfect manner: she seeks the grace of conversion for them; she encourages them to do good, to take loving care of each other and to serve the community in which they live and work (AL 78, emphasis added).

We shall see this pedagogy developed in Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia* as Pope Francis traces the steps of "accompaniment, discernment and integration of weakness". Clearly from the above quote the Pope wants to take people where they are and from that starting point "take the opportunity to accompany them in good faith" and with the "courtesy of listening" (AL 99), towards greater levels of faith and moral integrity.

What people need, says the Pope, "is not great knowledge, but rather the ability to feel and relish things interiorly that contents and satisfies the soul". Indeed. Divine truth is known by participation and practice, not by *more* thinking or discussing. In a sense we have to "eat" the truth more than understand it. This, as we shall see, is akin to John the Evangelist's own wisdom.

Pope Francis insists that the only way forward is by "proposing small steps that can be understood, accepted and appreciated.... Otherwise, by demanding too much, we gain nothing" (AL 271). If ever there was an understanding of growth and transformation as gradual, it is what Pope Francis goes on from this to say about catechesis:

In proposing values, *we have to proceed slowly, taking into consideration age and abilities*, without presuming to apply rigid and inflexible methods. The valuable contributions of psychology and the educational sciences have shown that changing behaviour *involves a gradual process*, but also that freedom needs to be channelled and stimulated, since by itself it does not ensure growth in maturity (AL 273, emphasis added).

In the fertile field set out between Chapters 1 to 7 of *Amoris Laetitia*, Pope Francis has sown many seeds referring to the law of gradualness. Moving on to Chapter 8 we reap the harvest.

2. *Amoris Laetitia*, Chapter Eight

Chapter Eight is entitled “Accompanying, Discerning and Integrating Weakness.” It may seem silly to admit this, but in my first reading of the title, the word “weakness” slipped right past me. I confess, therefore, that the law of gradualness applies very much to me! Both words, “integrating weakness”, have to be taken together to understand Pope Francis correctly. He wants to show that we are not called so much to transcend weakness as to incorporate it holistically into our spirituality, much like Paul in 2 Corinthians chapter 12 who “boasted” of his weaknesses, becoming “content” with having them, the better to know the grace of Christ.

The integration of weakness ties in, moreover, with Pope Francis’ frequent reference to the Church as a ‘field hospital’. In fact, such a self-understanding, he proposes, enables the Church to give due recognition to “constructive elements in [people’s] situations which do not yet or no longer correspond to her teaching” (AL 292).

With regard to gradualness in pastoral care, *Amoris Laetitia* addresses itself specifically to what have traditionally (and unfortunately) been called “irregular situations” of couples



A DAUGHTER OF ABRAHAM AND SARAH

The story of the Samaritan Woman in John chapter 4 is a classic example of the principle of gradualness in John. Imagine being a fly on the low wall surrounding the well, the one on which Jesus sat “tired by his journey”, observing and listening to the interaction between Jesus and the woman. Jesus takes the initiative. He is the lead dancer; his dialogue partner follows. Gradually and gently Jesus leads her from darkness to light, from fear to freedom, from ignorance to insight as he guides the conversation patiently through one obstacle, one objection, one barrier, one decoy, one excuse after the other. He engages the woman in conversation, gently stretching her mind and leading her gradually to faith and discipleship. The process might not feel quite as smooth for the woman herself as she progresses in fits and starts. But progress she does. In her growing relationship with Jesus she moves from a life of pretence, emptiness and embarrassment to a joy she never knew possible.

Let’s ask ourselves, what is one of the main handicaps to learning, to growing, to change and personal transformation? Baggage! We use the term for people stuck in their ways – they’ve got baggage. We use it, perhaps patronisingly, to excuse people or to assume that we understand them, given their “baggage”. Thus, “carrying a lot of baggage” is probably how we would describe the Samaritan woman, not just for the bucket on her head but, at a more personal level,

for her inner brokenness and her moral and psychological burdens. John's narrative gives us good reason to come to this conclusion. It is the sixth hour, in other words, noon. The woman had waited until the heat of the midday sun to come and draw water as that was the time of day she would be unlikely to meet others. This was to avoid embarrassment and scorn. She had a bit of a reputation, as she herself admits to Jesus later on in verse 17.

Watch the story as it unfolds, a story that John wants us to know was part of God's plan for Jesus. How so? Verse 4 says that Jesus "had" to go through Samaria. Logistically he didn't *have* to do that at all. There were other routes, and safer ones too. Typical of John, surface appearance often hides a divine mystery. The "had" implies Jesus' obedience to the will of his Father. In that short word, "had", we are offered another shining gem which recalls the Prologue and its message about God's great design. Here, in John 4, God's will is that "The One Sent" is now sent beyond the boundaries of Israel into Samaria. Jesus' mission is increasingly becoming universal in fulfilment of God's plan.

It has been a tiring journey and Jesus makes a stop. His disciples go into town to buy food, allowing John in his narrative to highlight the dynamics of the one-on-one encounter that is about to take place. A Samaritan woman arrives. For our own narrative purposes, we're going to give this woman a name even though John deliberately keeps her anonymous (as he will the blind man in Chapter 9), as a literary device indicating that she is representative of all of us, and, in certain aspects of this story, particularly of women. Shall we call her Sarai? She is after all a descendent of Abraham and Sarah – as are all of us who have come to faith.

Before the encounter between Jesus and Sarai and its ensuing dialogue, John adds another important detail about the place where all this happened, which is more than a 1st Century

version of GPS coordinates. The reference to the name of the Samaritan town being Sychar (ancient Shechem) and to “the land that Jacob gave to his son Joseph” as well as to “Jacob’s well” (verses 5 and 6) imply a tangible memory for both Jews and Samaritans, of the providence of God in their common history: God’s gift of land and water. John is preparing us, of course, for the seismic shift of faith we’re going to need as we see a providential, geographical spring give way to a fountain of divine-life-giving water in Jesus himself.

Sarai is now on the scene. She arrives with a bucket, a symbol of life’s burdensome routine (the daily drudge of fetching water in those days). We also said earlier, the bucket is symbolic of her personal “baggage”. Now people with baggage, we know are often in denial or very defensive. The barriers go up. Jesus initiates the conversation in the form of a request bordering on an order: “Give me a drink.” Sarai says, “What...? You, a Jew, ask me, a Samaritan...?” Can you see the barrier? But in Sarai’s case her barriers are no match for the Word-Made-Flesh, who understands our humanity from the inside. Gently and with compassion during his conversation with Sarai, Jesus gradually and systematically flattened the obstacles she kept putting in his way as he led her to profound faith.

The process is typical of the way John in his gospel uses the literary technique of presenting an initial misunderstanding. When Jesus mentions an unending flow of water, Sarai imagined the water overflowing at this very spot, the ancient place known as Jacob’s Well. But that’s not what Jesus has in mind. He is referring to water that gives life, symbolic of baptism and an inner relationship with the Holy Spirit. Sarai, perhaps even scornfully, asks Jesus whether he is greater than Jacob, probably thinking to herself: “He’s got a cheek! Who does he think he is?” Jesus ignores this too.

Raymond Brown comments: “Is not ‘no thanks, I already have all I need’ the first reaction of many people when someone

tries to interest them in something new religiously?" I confess that's how I feel when Bible-punchers come knocking at the door!

So, Jesus does not take the bait. He has a bigger agenda, a more important goal: to lead Sarai to God. That includes her seeing Jesus for who he himself really is. Remember our point about the dramatic irony of John's Prologue. *We*, of course, know from the Prologue who Jesus is. Now we want to observe how others – in this case, Sarai – come to the same insight, and, by extension, we who are following her story. What impact we want to know, does it have on us too?

Sarai is startled that a *Jew* and a *man* should ask for a drink. Talk about racial, religious and gender prejudice! You don't have to be a South African like me to admit that one of the biggest obstacles to deep encounter with another human being is the baggage of racial prejudice many people have, thanks to their upbringing and other childhood conditioning. John himself includes the comment, "Jews, in fact, do not associate with Samaritans" (v. 9). This discrimination goes back a long way, as John well knows; centuries in fact. It is not important for our purposes to provide a history lesson here, although readers might want to consult Brown and Moloney's useful summary of the split that occurred after the return from exile (see References). Our world today is rife with prejudice and bigotry rooted in age-old systems and mindsets, from colonialism to apartheid; from crusades to jihads; from nationalism to jingoism. Sarai had her own religious and ethnic baggage and it kicked in the minute she met Jesus.

She also had gender baggage. Religious rules and cultural practices of the time did not tolerate a person with the status of rabbi speaking alone with a woman. Outside of their immediate family cluster, women of the time didn't exist. Apart from an identity which they enjoyed only in strict relation to their patriarchal overlord (whether father, uncle,

husband or slave-owner) they were invisible. Sarai arrived at the well, saw Jesus and naturally assumed he would ignore her as he was bound to do. When he did begin to speak with her, she may even have had suspicions about his intentions as a man. Gender baggage indeed.

She has another unspoken assumption. She knew that her Samaritan bucket – should he drink from it – would have left him ritually unclean. As a Jew, Jesus would not have touched her non-kosher vessel. But Jesus is not fazed by that and in his response to Sarai in verse 10 he takes the conversation to a deeper level. “If you only knew...”

Surface appearance gives way to divine reality. In the story it is Jesus who is officially thirsty, but he gradually leads the woman to realise that at a profound level *she* is the one who is thirsty. She thirsts for healing, for forgiveness and for intimacy with God. Jesus puts her in touch with the deeper reality underlying her quest for spiritual freedom by helping her to face hard questions about her past, as well as the embarrassment of her present circumstances. With utmost compassion he helps her to face the inadequacy of her present life. His approach is filled with hope and possibility.

However, this does require first touching a raw nerve. Jesus brings up the question of her marital status. He mentions her “husband” (v. 16).

Here we have yet another obstacle in Sarai’s path to transformation. She has a complicated past. She’s been married, divorced and remarried five times and now she is cohabiting with a man who is not her husband. (In Chapter Eight of *Amoris Laetitia*, as we saw earlier, Pope Francis is aware, not without compassion, of similar situations today.) Note that Jesus does not say to Sarai, “Come back once you’ve sorted your life out. Go get an annulment first and fix your irregular situation, and we’ll take it from there.” That would be absurd. It would never be Jesus’ way. But he

does compel Sarai to face herself; to face the inadequacy of her life, to name her shame. He does so by staying with her, “accompanying” her (as Pope Francis urges us to do for one another) and instilling hope. He affirms her for speaking the truth about her circumstances (v. 18), something she would probably have been unable to do had he merely thrown the book at her. Instead, Jesus had led her gently to the point where she could be open about herself.

But suddenly this line of conversation stops. Is Sarai finding it awkward to continue with it? Possibly. Or, as John has it, Sarai herself concludes this topic of conversation by showing a growing appreciation of who Jesus might be, declaring him, in the light of his understanding of her situation, “a prophet.” We’re almost hoping she would follow through with this, say more about it, but then she pops another distraction: the question of where to worship. “On this mountain”, or Jerusalem, where the Jews believe “one ought to worship” (v. 20). There’s nothing like an old religious chestnut as a decoy to avoid making a personal commitment. But, yet again, Jesus refuses to be side-tracked. Besides, he says, the issue is now irrelevant. Both sites are replaced by “worship in spirit and truth” (v. 24), an indication in John of the universalism of Gospel faith.

Sarai then throws in another distraction which we might describe as a “putting off to the future” ploy. It almost comes across as if she’s saying to Jesus, “It’s been nice chatting to you, the theological debate was stimulating, but we’re actually in an in-between time awaiting the Messiah so, until then, well, let’s be on our way....”

But Jesus said to her, “I am. He is speaking to you” (v. 26).

Game, set and match, Sarai? Never mind the future, you’ve got to make a choice now.

John the dramatist, however, leaves us waiting with bated

breath by creating another interruption, this time an external one. At a crucial stage in the conversation between Jesus and Sarai he writes, "Just then his disciples returned..." (v. 27. They had left at v. 8, so their absence implies a long interlude). Sarai's response to Jesus' claim, cut short and unable to become a profession of faith in so many words, is instead going to be played out in and through her mission to her own village. We'll leave her for a moment as, bucket-less (no more baggage?), she returns to the very people from whom she felt alienated.

Now it's the disciples' turn - and they have "baggage" too! They're shocked to see their holy rabbi talking to a mere woman who can only be suspect. John has them ask questions which remain unspoken: "What do you want from her? Why are you talking to her?" This shows up their hidden cultural prejudices and it also indicates that they still don't realise fully who Jesus is. When they do speak, it is to remonstrate with Jesus about having something to eat, but he tells them that he already has food to eat. Typical of the Evangelist, John has his characters taking things literally. As we've already pointed out, there's initial misunderstanding coupled with doubt, confusion and questioning which, led by Jesus the Teacher, then moves to deeper theological teaching. The disciples' opening gambit was perfectly reasonable: they knew Jesus was tired and hungry. But he explains something beyond the empirical. "My food is to do the will of the one who sent me and to complete his work" (v. 34).

Can you hear there another echo from the Prologue? We're listening to the same keynote in John's Gospel: Jesus is the one "sent" by the Father, who "fulfils the will" and "completes the work" he was sent to do. This is the essence, the very being, the core, the personal dynamic, the power, the "food" of Jesus: to fulfil God's will. He is sent to reveal that God desires the same for us: doing God's will not as burden but as food, as life and as nourishment.

John 4:27-38, as an aside to Sarai's narrative, is a wonderful example of in-service training for Jesus' disciples. He has them, his core group of friends, gather around him as, step by step, he teaches them, using leading phrases and questions like: "Have you not got a saying..." and "Look around you, look at the fields..." and "Here the proverb holds true..." Jesus is energized by his task as teacher, instructing his disciples about their own mission to continue his mission, reaping a harvest they had not sown, yet in the end being part of a celebration where "sower and reaper rejoice together" (v. 36).

In the meantime, there's something going on in the village. Sarai, her shame removed, having "hurried back" to them tells her near neighbours, "Come and see a man who has told me everything I ever did!" Her conversation with Jesus is still fresh in her mind. You can almost feel her excitement. But then she adds a rhetorical question which seems to indicate that she is still in process of digesting her experience; still growing in insight; perhaps still formulating her own response to the claim of Jesus, "I am he", which had been interrupted by the arrival of the disciples. The question she asks, of herself as much as to the villagers is, "I wonder if he is the Christ?" (v.29)

Sarai's faith comes to completion in her being instrumental in leading others to Jesus. One could argue that her confession of faith is expressed not so much in a creedal formula (such as we find with Martha, Thomas, Peter and others) as in missionary dynamism. Centuries later Saint Dominic will make it his motto "*to contemplate, and to share with others the fruit of contemplation*". Faith, in John's gospel, cannot be separated from mission. The theme of mission pervades John, from Jesus' self-description as "the one sent" (used 44 times) to the gospel identity of Jesus' followers as well: "As the Father sent me, so do I send you" (Jn 20:21).

Sarai's faith, we are saying, is expressed in mission. And

it is a mission that bears fruit as this verse attests: “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s testimony” (v. 39). They want to get to know Jesus for themselves, so they invite him to stay with them. He stays for two days. That detail is not just by-the-way. It is a definite timeframe. John is, as usual, sensitive to what we have been calling the law of gradualness. The 48-hour abiding presence of Jesus, sharing meals with the villagers, sleeping on their floors, chatting with them in their household court-yards, is, literally, a “revelation” to these Samaritans, erstwhile enemies of the Jews. Thus, John concludes his narrative: “They said to the woman, ‘It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world’” (v. 42).

That sentence would normally have provided a great punch line to end our study of John 4, but it contains another hidden gem echoing the Prologue which we cannot let slip by. The Greek term John uses has changed from the word *logon* – “testimony” – in v. 39, to *lalian* – “your words” – in v. 42. Without being derogatory, we may translate the second terms as chit-chat or small-talk, highlighting the fact that the people of the village can by-pass Sarai’s words as they now enjoy an un-mediated personal encounter with the Logos himself, the Word-Made-Flesh. Ultimately, that is what John desires for us, his readers, too – a personal encounter with Jesus.