A Method for Reading Church Documents in Moral Theology

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Even a person with the best sense of direction needs a road map from time to time to keep his or her bearings. Road maps are guides; they don’t show us everything that we will find along the way nor do they prevent us from taking other routes. But, they can be helpful in making our way through new territory.

This essay provides a road map of sorts to navigate Church documents in the area of moral theology. It directs readers’ attention to specific important elements in these texts and provides them with a tool to do a critical reading of the document and to understand the whole of a teaching from the church.

What do I mean by “a critical reading” of a text? Travelers, ordinarily, do not simply watch what goes by as they travel about. Curious travelers wonder about the things that they see, perhaps wanting to know more, and even lingering for a while to take in the scenery more carefully. To read a document critically means to read for understanding, to read with a questioning mind, looking for the document’s structure, noting its strengths, and attending to questions that pop into

our minds. The greatest sign of respect for a teaching is to do a critical reading so that, at the end, readers have a thorough grasp of the content of the document, its structure, arguments, conclusions, and their own assessment of the teaching.

Any proposed method, any road map, has its drawbacks. It presents one way of reading a document. There are surely others. While calling attention to certain things along the way, others might easily be missed. Nonetheless, in my experience as a teacher, the method I am describing here has proved helpful both to me in presenting church teaching and to students who are exposed, sometimes for the first time, to church documents dealing with issues in moral theology. In order that this essay does not appear like a roadmap to Anywhere, USA, I will include examples from teachings as I explain each aspect of the method so that readers can see how the method works in practice.

Considerations When Approaching a Text

Before moving directly to the method, however, I would like to make three preliminary remarks, one concerning the context in which a document appears, the second regarding the authoritative nature of a text from the magisterium, and finally, a comment on the central concern in the Catholic Tradition's moral theology. Readers should attend to these points in order to understand the purpose of the document and its primary focus.


It is instructive to understand the context of a document. Some questions to ask might be: Why was this document written? What signs of the times is the author responding/reacting to? What signs are not being taken into account on this issue? Questions such as these contribute to a sharper analytical reading of the text.

More often than not, texts that deal with moral theology are written in response to the lived moral experience of the Catholic community. For example, the foreword to the 1987 text from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith on reproductive technologies, Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Reply to Certain Questions of the Day (Donum Vitae), states that the document was written in response to questions from bishops and others in the church as to what position the Church was taking on new reproductive technologies. Similarly, toward the beginning of his encyclical, The Splendor of Truth (Veritatis Splendor), Pope John Paul II wrote that the purpose of the encyclical was “to reflect on the whole of the Church’s moral teaching, with the precise goal of recalling certain fundamental truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied” (John Paul II, 1993, §4).

Often, then, the document itself will refer to a context in which it arose. There is, of course, the broader political and sociological context in which documents
are written that may not receive explicit mention in the texts from the magisterium. The document regarding reproductive technologies arose in the context of new capabilities presented by science for human reproduction. At the same time it arose within a church that, at least in some circles, was looking for guidance as to how to evaluate these new reproductive technologies. Attention to the context of the document provides some assistance in understanding why it was written and even why it says what it does.

2. What Is the Nature of the Document and the Level of Authority with which It Is Proposed?

A second point for consideration when approaching any church teaching, not only in the area of moral theology, is to understand the nature of the document itself. Who wrote it? To whom is it addressed? What is the authoritative level of the document?

On this last point, the church has traditionally made distinctions regarding the authoritative weight of a document. The most authoritative documents are apostolic constitutions. The more common and authoritative teachings are those that come from the pope himself, as head of the college of bishops. However, not all teachings of the pope have the same authoritative value. An encyclical letter, for example, is more authoritative than an allocution to a group of people in a private audience with the pope. Attending to the authoritative level of a teaching allows one to respect both the manner in which it was written and the assent expected on the part of the believing community.

Teachings of the church may be categorized according to four levels: dogma, doctrine taught definitively, authoritative doctrine, and church discipline (Gaillardetz, 2003).

Dogmas are divinely revealed truths that require an assent of faith on the part of the believer. Among dogmas we could cite the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Doctrine taught definitively refers to teachings that are not divinely revealed but which are necessary to safeguard and expound divine revelation. Canon 750 from the Code of Canon Law says that teachings proposed definitively are “required for the holy keeping and faithful exposition of the deposit of faith” (John Paul II, 1998). A moral teaching that falls under this category is the norm forbidding the direct taking of innocent human life through abortion. The clearest statement of this moral teaching with an equally clear expression of the authoritative level of the teaching appears in Pope John Paul II’s 1995 encyclical, The Gospel of Life (Evangelium Vitae), §62. Key words to look for when discerning doctrine taught definitively are those that Pope John Paul II used in The Gospel of Life, and Pope Paul VI before him in an address to Italian jurists, where they wrote that the tradition’s teaching on abortion is “unchanged and unchangeable.” In the case of both popes, however, they were simply affirming the unchanged
and unchangeable nature of the doctrine in light of the consistent teaching of
the universal ordinary magisterium of the church. Consistency alone, however,
is not sufficient to determine that a doctrine has been taught definitively. A clear
statement from the proper authority is necessary. In the best of case, an argument
should be offered as to why the deposit of faith is endangered if the particular
teaching under consideration does not receive the assent of the faithful. Teaching
proposed definitively or infallibly, however, is rare in the area of moral theology.
This statement is equally true of the Holy Father’s exercise of the charism of
infallibility. Pope Benedict XVI has remarked that the pope “is infallible on the
rarest of occasions” (Benedict XVI, 2005, 182). However, simply because a teach-
ing is not declared definitively does not diminish its importance for the Catholic
community, nor does it suggest that the teaching is just an opinion of the Church.

Authoritative doctrine, that is, those teachings not taught definitively, are to be
assented to by the faithful with a religious deference of will and mind (see The
Dogmatic Constitution on the Church [Lumen Gentium], §25). Most of the moral
teaching of the church would fall under the category of authoritative doctrine.

Finally, church discipline or prudential admonitions refer to most of church
law. For example, the discipline of celibacy for diocesan priests of the Latin rite
falls under this category.

Failure to attend to the nature of the teaching in the manner outlined above can
lead to a misrepresentation of the authoritative nature of a text and a misplace-
ment of the teaching in the hierarchy of truths. Attention to the proper authorita-
tive value of the teaching respects the wisdom of the tradition in establishing
various levels of authority in the first place.

3. Focus on Person’s Authentic Human Good in Catholic Moral Teaching

This final preliminary remark concerns a central point in Catholic moral theol-
ogy. A significant shift occurred in moral theology in the mid-twentieth century,
a shift often described as a move from an act-centered to a person-centered moral
theology. The guiding question now in assessing right and wrong moral action is
“What effect does this action have on persons? Does it contribute to their flourish-
ing as human beings?” At one point in On Human Life (Humanae Vitae), Pope
Paul VI writes: “It could never be right for [the Church] to declare lawful what is
in fact unlawful, since that, by its very nature, is always opposed to the true good
of man” (§18). Something is “unlawful” because it would harm “the true good” of
a person. In another place, the same document argues that following the teaching
of the Church in this area “enhances man’s dignity and confers benefits on human
society” (§20). Again, we hear the concern for the person in community. Pope John
Paul II expressed the centrality of the person in moral reasoning in this way in
his 1993 encyclical, Veritatis Splendor:
The morality of acts is defined by the relationship of man’s freedom with the authentic good. . . . Acting is morally good when the choices of freedom are in conformity with man’s true good and thus express the voluntary ordering of the person towards his ultimate end: God himself, the supreme good in whom man finds his full and perfect happiness. (§71)

In reading church documents in moral theology, then, one should be attentive to the concern for the truth about the human person that is expressed in the arguments in a document.

**Elements of the Method**

There are six points to consider when reading a document: 1) The values contained in the document; 2) the logic or reasoning process that is at work in the document; 3) the conclusion(s) that the document proposes; 4) the pastoral sensitivity of the document; 5) the strengths of the teaching; and 6) any ongoing questions that arise in the mind of the reader. The first four points are directed toward the content of a document. What does it say? What values does it seek to uphold? How does it see these values threatened or protected? What arguments are proposed which lead to the conclusions that are presented? Is the writer sensitive to the real life situation of the people who are touched by this teaching?

All of these questions lead the reader to consider carefully what is said in a given document. The final two parts of the method, that is, naming strengths and raising questions, are directed to the critical reading of the text. If the first four parts deal with the objective content of a document, the last two move inside the mind and heart of the reader urging him or her to reflect critically on the substance of the teaching. A question to ask regarding the strengths of the document might be: What word from the teaching needs to be heard for the good of the people of our day? The ongoing question reflects either a lack of clarity on the part of the reader or some basic questions that make it difficult for the reader to make sense of the teaching. These questions often arise from the moral experience of the reader and move him or her to seek greater clarification if possible.

We now move to a more detailed discussion of each of these points of the method.

1. **Values**

The lens through which Church teaching analyzes issues, as stated earlier, is the good of the human person, the truth of the human person. Look first in a document on moral theology for the values that are at stake with regard to the particular moral issue. The presumption is that when these values are honored, the authentic human good of persons is furthered. When they are threatened, persons are harmed.
Among values that we would expect the moral teaching of the church to uphold are the dignity of the human person, the good of life itself, the value of responsible healthy relationships with God and with others, the common good, and so forth. The church believes that when these values and others are respected in moral action, human beings flourish; they are not harmed.

2. The Logic or Reasoning Process of the Document

The second element to look for in reading a document is the logic of the argument. How does the author of the document reason to the conclusions that follow? How does the document demonstrate that the values upheld in the document are being threatened or respected by the issue under consideration?

When Church teachings are written to address particular issues of concern within the Catholic community, they will offer a specific “bottom line” teaching, a norm that is to be held by the members of the believing community. More often than not, people know the bottom line of a teaching. Most members of the faith community, for example, know that the Catholic Church considers contraception immoral; the church’s norms against embryonic stem cell research, abortion, euthanasia, and so forth, are also well known. What is often not known, however, is the reasoning that leads to the conclusion. Yet, it is crucial that those who wish to be familiar with and communicate church teaching are able to articulate how the conclusion was reached. They must know more than the “bottom line.” As important as the conclusion is, then, it is best understood in the context of the reasoning that grounds it.

In the teaching of the church on contraception, for example, the documents argue that married couples commit themselves to one another completely, a total gift of self to one another. The teaching argues that when couples contracept, they withhold the gift of fertility from one another, compromise the total gift of self to one another, and do harm to their relationship. The immorality of embryonic stem cell research, abortion, and euthanasia is based on the direct taking of innocent human life, depriving a person of the fundamental human good, life itself. Church teaching against death penalty in almost all cases is based on the dignity of the person and the recognition that there are means other than capital punishment that a state can employ to protect itself from criminals. The teaching also has at its foundation a hope for conversion for the criminal. Important to note in all cases, is that the arguments direct the readers’ attention to what will harm or help the human person. The arguments are person-centered.

3. Conclusion(s)

The reasoning articulated in a document will lead to some conclusions, some norms to guide the Catholic community regarding the issue under consideration. Depending on the comprehensiveness of the teaching, one might find general principles as well as specific judgments on moral actions.
In teachings in the area of sexuality, for example, a general principle is that genital sexual expression, in order to contribute to human flourishing, ought to be marked by two qualities, one love-making, the other life-giving. The language of the documents is a unitive and a procreative dimension. This general person-centered principle gives way to more specific teachings regarding regulation of birth, genital sexual expression outside of marriage, the separation of procreation from sexual intercourse in reproductive technologies, and the like.

It is important to reiterate that these conclusions must be set in the context of the reasoning process that leads to them. Keeping the conclusions of church teaching connected to the concern for the good of the person continually reminds believers of the dignity of the person and shapes their consciences to think of moral issues in terms of the effect on persons. Merely repeating conclusions as principles that must be followed can promote a legalism in morality and may fail to encourage a reflective living of the moral life.

4. Pastoral Dimension of the Document

The fourth aspect to look for in a document on a moral issue is the pastoral dimension of the text. My own pastoral experience as a priest and teacher has shown me that the more that I understand the situation of the community or student and express my solidarity with them by careful attention to the way I speak, the more ready people are to listen to what I have to say and to consider it thoughtfully and even prayerfully. Church documents are not like documents that are written to members of a club simply articulating the rules of membership. Rather, they are texts written to guide people in often troubling and trying situations. Consequently, one finds frequently in these texts words that express a particular pastoral sensitivity to the persons who will read the document or to those who pastor to people affected by the teaching of the document. For example, in the 1987 document on reproductive technologies that evaluates some options in response to infertility, there is a recognition of the suffering experienced by infertile couples and encourages them to patience and urges science to find morally acceptable means to alleviate their suffering at not being able to bear children. Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, On Human Life (Humanae Vitae), offers a lengthy section of “pastoral directives,” words addressed to various groups, but especially to married couples and to those who pastor them.

In the first paragraph on the section including pastoral directives, Pope Paul VI writes beautifully:

Our words would not be an adequate expression of the thought and solicitude of the Church, Mother and Teacher of all peoples, if, after having recalled men to the observance and respect of the divine law regarding matrimony, they did not also support mankind in the honest regulation of birth amid the difficult
conditions which today afflict families and peoples. The Church, in fact, cannot act differently toward men than did the Redeemer. (§19)

The pastoral sensitivity in this brief text alone is important for those involved in pastoral ministry. It is not enough simply to articulate a teaching and “let the chips fall where they may.” Rather, the community’s obligation is to support people in their efforts to receive and live the teaching. An advantage of this particular method for reading documents is that it highlights that the pastoral words of a teaching are part of the whole teaching. It is not sufficient to say that the teaching of the Church argues against particular moral issues. It also places demands on those involved in pastoral ministry, calling them to the imitation of the Redeemer in their pastoral practice.

5. **Strengths and Ongoing Questions**

The fifth and sixth elements of the method move the reader away from a somewhat detached reading of the material and encourage the reader’s own personal reflection on the document. These final points articulate the reader’s personal response to the document under consideration.

In the first instance, the reader asks, “What are the strengths of this teaching?” In other words, “what points raised in the teaching seem to me to be particularly important for me and for our world to hear? In my reading of the text, what stands out as particularly significant in light of the signs of the times?”

The sixth part of this method encourages the reader to note ongoing questions. Perhaps the reader’s own experience moves him or her to a different reading of the signs of the times. Perhaps the reasoning in the teaching itself does not seem convincing to the reader. Or maybe the reader has other arguments to offer in support of the conclusion reached. The fundamental point in this last section is to articulate the questions that still linger in the reader’s mind after having read a document thoroughly and respectfully.

**Closing Remarks**

In closing, I would simply reiterate that the model outlined above offers readers a way to deal respectfully with documents from the magisterium of the church. In our own day, people sometimes fall on one side or the other in relationship to church teaching. They either accept every word from the teaching office as if it were directly from the mouth of God or reject every word, practically denying the working of the Spirit in the teaching office at all.

I believe that it is the responsibility of people in the believing community, those in pastoral ministry in particular, to know the tradition of the church and to be able to articulate the teachings clearly. At the same time, they must engage the
teaching as thinking adults with their own life experiences of these critical moral issues.

Readers who employ the method outlined above can be sure to deal thoroughly and responsibly with the teachings of the church and trust that they have a tool that will help them to grasp the whole of the teaching and to communicate it faithfully.

References


| Components of The Teaching Title of Document Values |
|---------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| What value does the document see as upheld or threatened by the matter under consideration? |
| Logic of the Argument |
| How are the values considered by the matter presented? |
| How are the values understood? |
| Logical of the Argument |
| Conclusion |
| What conclusions are reached from the arguments proposed? |
| What conclusions are reached from the argument? |
| Strengths |
| What are the strong points of the document? |
| Words that need to be heard? |
| Pastoral Dimension |
| Does the document address the real-life pastoral situation? What does it say? |
| Ongoing Questions |
| What questions are you left with as you finish the document? Theoretical? Pastoral? |

Readers may wish to use this to jot down notes as they read a text.

Template of the Method for Reading Church Documents in Moral Theology

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