

VATICAN II: AN EPOCH OF RENEWAL

IN MORAL THEOLOGY

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INTRODUCTION

Moral theology as a distinct discipline of theology was of a much later origin than dogmatic theology. For example, as and when any deposit of faith was challenged by extremists, the Church was swift and firm to refute such extreme positions right from its inception. The Apostolic Council of Jerusalem is a typical case in hand (Acts 15:1-21). But it is not so in matters of morals. However, formal consideration of Christian moral behaviour is as old as the New Testament records of moral teachings of our Lord Jesus and of the apostles particularly Paul, as they applied it to the early Christian communities.

I EVOLUTION OF METHODOLOGY

1. Manuals

The original and creative ideas in the early periods (600-1200) and anything of singular significance for later development of moral theology are the manuals of penitential books – the *libri paenitentiales*. They were composed to help and direct the confessor in determining the gravity of the

sins and consequently the character and degree of the sacramental penance he was to give the penitent. It was nothing more than casuistry. We are indebted to Thomas Aquinas for a magnificent synthesis of all that the theological tradition of the previous ages had handed down as well as for a notable beginning in moral theology.¹ Nevertheless the technical term moral theology (*theologia moralis*) referring to a distinctive science systematically separate from other branches of theology has been in vogue since the Council of Trent.²

2. Call or Need for Change?

Catholic moral tradition has been significantly influenced and shaped by the thoughts of the natural law theory of Aquinas. As history evolves, there is a world of difference between the human person of the 13th century and that of the 20th and 21st centuries. Fundamental nature may remain the same. But the environment in which the modern man has to actualize his capacities (*essencia*), bloom into full humanhood and finally reach his ultimate end, God, is never the same.

The understanding of modern man has drastically changed, for the better no doubt, from Aquinas' *animal rationale* to the present *homo technocratus*. Swift and drastic progresses in all areas of science – human, medical, social, cultural etc. – and technologies have added more and more new dimensions to the classicist concept of rational animal. Man becomes the centre and meeting point of all these revolutionary changes and conflicting forces (*GS* n. 10). Man is not simply an individual. His nature is to relate himself to others around him and therefore he is essentially a relational being. In such an entirely changed situation old morals and religion do not seem to be of relevance any more to the computer man. It seems a matter of course to reject them as incompatible with the rapid scientific progress and a new

kind of humanism. It is against this background Vatican II is considered as a historic event in the life of the Church.

3. Shift in Methodology

The Council hammers on the idea “reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel” (GS n. 4, 33, 46). These signs of the times are nothing but the new experiences of the man of the computer age (GS n. 46). Again the Council declares ‘it is man, who is the key to this discussion, man considered *whole and entire...*’ showing thereby its openness to take man no more in the limited sense of the classicists but in a broader way i.e., man with all the different dimensions added to him due to the rapid evolution of things around him.

This paved the way for a new methodology of doing theology. Man is now essentially a relational being, a social being. This necessarily calls for a man-centred approach i.e., anthropological approach. Taking his cue from Vatican II’s “man considered *whole and entire*”, Louis Janssens, a distinguished Leuven (Belgium) moral theologian, took a radical approach to moral theology, namely, the personalist approach which considers man in his totality, i.e. man in all his relational dimensions. To use his words ‘*the human person adequately considered*’ is the proper forum and context for the study of any moral problem. He lists eight relational dimensions of the human person adequately considered.³ His is a personalist (i.e. person-centred) methodology. Charles E. Curran calls it historical methodology (i.e. methodology suitable to historical contexts) as opposed to classicist methodology or natural law methodology. But now he advocates anthropological methodology.⁴ There is no substantial difference between these two methodologies. Some others would call it experience-based inductive methodology. Everything ultimately boils down to an anthropological

rather new anthropological approach. So according to the *epicheia* of the Council fathers – “reading the signs... gospel”⁵ – we can correctly and precisely call this methodology Christian Anthropological Methodology.

Once the shift in methodology was made from natural law methodology to Christian anthropological methodology, as the good Pope now St. John XXIII said, fresh breeze began to flow into the domain of theology more so of moral theology, making this discipline more and more relevant to the signs of the times thus cleaning it of its centuries old stink of staleness and stagnation. Opening the door to this new methodology is the greatest of gifts of Vatican II to moral theology. No doubt it has revitalized moral theology as can be seen below.

Space limits my desire to number the innumerable revivals that have been brought about by the Christian Anthropological Method in moral theology. Three important branches of moral theology – Medical Ethics, Sexual Ethics and Social Ethics – are selected and given brief but adequate treatment.

II PROGRESS IN MORAL THEOLOGY

1. Medical Ethics

Let me take one case and explain how the new methodology has developed a new moral principle and tradition. The case in question is the principle of totality. Traditional moral theology inscribed in the manuals would not permit donation of an organ, e.g. kidney, of a living donor to another person in need. For, the manuals taught that self-mutilation was forbidden by the principle of non-maleficence (do no harm / avoid evil) – the primary negative percept of the natural law.⁶ The reason is that God is the sole author of human life and that man is only a steward. Man as care-taker has only the duty to preserve the body God has given, in its totality. And so he is

not free to inflict direct mutilation in his body except in the extreme case of saving his own life. For, the part is for the whole. However, to inflict harm to the totality of his body (i.e. direct mutilation) as a donor of organ to others was out of the question almost till the middle of the 20th century. The principle of totality did not cover this application.⁷ It was covered by the principle of double effect. But a shift from the natural law methodology to Christian anthropological methodology made a remarkable and reasonable change in the application of the principle. Vatican II paved the way for it by reading the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the gospel (*GS* n 4).

Here we see a transformative development of a bioethical principle – the principle of totality, in the light of a changed situation which is the present experience of man. Medical technology has made tremendous progress assuring man that with one healthy kidney a man can lead a normal and healthy life right till the end of his sojourn on earth. So the principle of totality is seen to be of benefit both to the donor because it is not an evil as considered earlier, and to the recipient. Here we see man as a relational being, a social being having concern for the other in the society rather humanity in the way he can. Analytical interpretation of the medical principle from the biblical / gospel perspective adds strength to this argument. Canningham made a pioneering study in it. According to him the totality referred to is not simply one's own physical body but the mystical body of Christ, of which everybody male and female is a member.⁸

Here the principle of totality is an aspect of Christian anthropology. Remaining healthy, if one can help another is not an evil, but good. This understanding of the principle from an anthropological perspective is now easily advanced by moralists to justify transplantations.⁹ We see here the transformative development of a principle (*totality*) through the infusion of a virtue (charity) into a reformulation of the principle that we may now call the principle of *solidarity*.¹⁰ That, this is a case of development, and not

desertion is evidenced by retaining the term totality, though obviously with a new and broader meaning. Isn't this a significant breakthrough in medial morals?

2. Sexual Ethics

Coming to sexual ethics, another important dimension of moral theology, Vatican II made a profound impact on conjugal life. The chapter on 'Dignity of marriage and the Family' in *Gaudium et Spes* breathes an entirely new life. It is a liberation from the clutches of the medieval theology influenced by St. Augustine.

2.1. Nature of Marriage: *Contract to Covenant*

Gaudium et Spes deliberately shows the natural law terminology – contract – which is more juridical and expressive more of rights and duties. Instead, it employs the biblical concept – covenant – which connotes personal relationship and an irrevocable bond of love. This is to departure from Trent's understanding of marriage which is more impersonal and narrow in outlook because of the demarcated rights and duties of each partner.

Christ our Lord blessed this love, ... modelled on Christ's own union with the Church. Just as of old Testament God encountered his people with a *covenant*¹¹ of love and fidelity, so our Saviour the spouse of the Church now encounters Christian spouses through the sacrament of marriage" (*GS* n. 48).

Since love, as that of Christ and his Church, is the centre of the life of the partners, conjugal act through which their love is uniquely expressed is a sign of intimate and chaste union sanctifying their married life.

Married love is uniquely expressed and perfected by the exercise of that proper to marriage. Hence acts in the marriage by which the *intimate and chaste union* of the spouses takes place are noble and honourable; the

truly human performance of these acts fosters the self-giving they signify and enriches the spouses in joy and gratitude (*GS* n 49).

A healthy and deeper understanding like this of marriage was ruled out in the natural law based morals of Augustine and later by Thomas Aquinas. They held that outside the reproductive purpose conjugal act would be a serious sin. With the intention of having a new life, the marital act could be a venial sin since the influence of concupiscence was there.

2.2. Purpose of Marriage: *Hierarchy to Equality*

Another land mark contribution of the Council pertains to the finality of marriage. Following the Tridentine theology until towards the middle of the previous century magisterial pronouncements spoke of marriage as a lawful contract between man and woman and hierarchically classified its ends as primary and secondary – the former being procreation and upbringing of children and the latter mutual help of the partners. This inevitable distinction was the result of Ulpian's¹² concept of natural law. Man was defined as *animal rationale*. Obviously then, as Charles E. Curren a reputed American Catholic moral theologian observes, the “primary” is that which is common to all animals and humans. Ulpian and Thomas Aquinas in so citing, use the sexual union and procreation as examples of that which is common to humans and all the animals. “Secondary” is that which is specific to the humans. Since only humans and not animals have sexual intercourse as a sign and expression of love, the love union aspect of sexuality remains proper to humans and therefore secondary.

But Vatican II sets aside the old terminology of ‘primary and secondary ends’ of marriage. Since the entire conjugal life gets the new anthropological perspective of the covenantal love, the finality is consequently presented as one continuous act of love running through the entire life of the partners, as it were, the warp in a loom. Intimate and self-giving personal relationship is

manifested in bodily union which is open to new life and further to the education of children. There is no hierarchy of purposes. Even after the children have been settled in life or even if there is no child of the conjugal union, the conjugal life of love remains open ended, and growing deeper and broader till their last breath (*GS* n. 50).

2.3. Marriage – Family: *Institution to Domestic Church*

Another noteworthy development the Council has brought about in conjugal morality concerns the nature of the family. Earlier family was considered as an institution. It is the ultimate unit of the society. Mersner would say that family is the cell of the society.¹³ Such an understanding is inevitable against the background of natural law as the law of life. But the Council rightly has enobled the nature of the family by calling it a *domestic Church* (*LG* 11).

Such a definition is in conformity with the signs of the times. The Church is a community / gathering of believers. If so each member has a duty to promote the faith of the other in a way he / she can. The family therefore is a believing community in miniature wherein the first seeds of faith are sown in the children by the parents.

3. Social Ethics

3.1. Human Dignity and Religious Liberty

Now we take a turn to social ethics. Here moral doctrine of freedom which should address religious belief is a major concern. No one can deny the tremendous development that has occurred in the Church's teaching on human rights especially right to religious freedom. Once upon a time no later than the time of St. Augustine, a bishop was considered virtuous and holy if

he invoked imperial power to coerce heretics to return to the Church. At a later time in Church history it was doctrine that a relapsed heretic would be judged by the ecclesiastical authorities and remanded to secular authorities for execution.¹⁴ Popes, bishops and theologians stoutly and unanimously denied religious liberty of heretics. Council (e.g. Fourth Lateran Council)¹⁵ and papal teachings (e.g. Boniface VIII,¹⁶ Pius IX and Leo XIII) strongly condemned religious liberty. Things did not change even at the time of Protestant Reformation. It only led to the acceptance of not of religious liberty but of religious tolerance in parts of Europe. Tolerance is permission of what is frankly described as evil, but a lesser evil to avert religious persecution.¹⁷

All that dramatically changed quite recently nearly five decades ago. Deeper understanding of man's dignity as consisting in being 'the image of God' and introduction of dynamic (not stagnant) and wholistic (not limited and again static as *animal rationale*) concept of the human person as relational, social being made it possible for the Second Vatican Council to accept freedom as a condition and foundation of true dignity of the human person and teach that religious liberty is a sacred human right.¹⁸

The Vatican Council declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all men should be immune from coercion on the part of the individual, social group... nobody is forced to act against his convictions in religious matters in private or in public.... This right of human person to *religious freedom must be given such recognition in the Constitution order of society as will make it a civil right* (DH n. 2.)

Underlining the freedom of Conscience in this matter the Council further says:

"It is through his conscience that man sees and recognizes the demands of the divine law. He is bound to follow this conscience faithfully in all his

activity so that he may come to God, who is his last end. Therefore *he must not be forced to act contrary to his conscience nor must he be prevented from acting according to his conscience, especially in religious matters*" (DH n.3.)

Thus the Council renounces the instruments of external power in matters of religion and affirms the dignity even of an erring conscience.

3.2. Power of the State

The Council in no uncertain terms states the purpose of the power or authority to deliver the common good of the civil society (DH n.3.) and in the same breath affirms the exclusive right of the parents to the number of children they want to have. Thus the Council eliminates the state completely from the scene of decision making regarding the reproductive life of the couples. The state has no power to enforce the number of children parents should have.

.... In virtue of man's inalienable right to marriage and the procreation of children, the decision regarding the number of children depends in the judgment of the parents and *is in no way to be left to the decrees of public authority*" (GS n.74,87).

At the same time the Council cautions them against taking such decisions as arbitrarily but advises them to do them responsibly, by introducing a new principle – *Responsible Parenthood* (GS n.51).

3.3. War to No War

Fully aware of the stockpile of nuclear weapons capable of inflicting immense and indiscriminate havocs to humanity and cosmos, the Council has shifted from the so-called 'just war' theory (which in a way justified the

crusades) to undertake a completely fresh reappraisal of war, to eventually to the point of no war as it is a crime against God and humanity.

“Every act of war directed to the indiscriminate destruction of whole cities or vast areas with their inhabitants is a *crime against God and man*, which merits firm and unequivocal condemnation” (GS n. 80).

CONCLUSION

There are only two persons in the cosmos. One is the eternal God who is a divine person, and the other man, the human person. The eternally good God has placed all his creatures around man (humankind) making him the centre of his entire creation. Now theology is not for God but for man because it is man who has to reach his final destiny, God, through the use of everything God has placed around him and under him. As everything around him is rapidly evolving it has tremendous impact on man since he is the centre and meeting point of these changes. These changes will go on perhaps more rapidly than now. These changes to put it in the Council's words, are 'the signs of the times' that should be interpreted in the light of the revealed word. Moral principles may remain the same. But their interpretations will and should vary according to the signs of the future times. This calls for still more openness on the part of mother Church. Vatican II has, by making a shift from the natural law methodology to Christian anthropological methodology has set precedence in this regard. It is not enough, though. For, the pilgrim Church has a long way to go.

(EndNote)

¹ Bernard Häring, *Law of Christ*, Vol 1, p. 11.

² John Mohoney, *The Making of Moral Theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Paperbacks, 1990) p. viii.

³ For an elaborate study of 'the human person adequately considered' refer to Louis Jassens, "Artificial Insemination: Ethical Considerations," *Louvian Studies* 8:1 (1980) 3-29.

⁴ Charles E. Curran, "Natural Law in Moral Theology," in ed. C.E. Curran et al., *Readings in Moral Theology – No 7: Natural Law and Theology* (New York: Paulist Press) 250 -62. C.E. Curran, "Anthropological Bases of Catholic Social Teachings," in. ed. C.E. Curran, *Readings in Moral Theology – No 13*, p. 171-194.

⁵ Regarding the biblical basis (i.e. Christian basis) for moral theology the Council has the following to say: "In like manner other theological subjects should be renewed through a more vivid contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of holy scripture..." *Decree on Priestly Formation – OT* n. 16.

⁶ Charles J. McFadden, *Medical Ethics* (London: Burns and Oats, 1962), 267. See also, Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, vol. 2 (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949) 149-199.

⁷ Thomas J. Donnell, *Medicine and Christian Morality* (New York: Alb House, 1976) 109; *The Pope Speaks* 5:3 (1959) 334.

⁸ Raphael Gallagher, "Catholic Medical Ethics: A Tradition which Progresses," in C.E. Curran, ed., *Readings in Moral Theology, No. 13*, p. 309.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 310.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 307.

¹¹ Emphases in quotations added.

¹² Ulpian (*Domitius Ulpianus*) was a Roman jurist of the third century. He wrote prolifically on law in a clear and elegant style. Aquinas cites Ulpian's definition on a number occasions in the *Summa Theologiae*, for example, I – II, q 90, a. 1, ob. 3; q 96, a. 5, ob 3.

Charles E. Curran, "Natural Law in Moral Theology", in C.E. Curran et al. ed., *Readings in Moral Theology* 7, p. 258.

¹³ Johannes Mersner, *Social Ethics* (London: B. Herden Book Co., 1965) p. 419.

¹⁴ "Church "cannot imitate" God in reading hearts and so does not keep relapsed heretics "from peril of death" imposed by the state. (Pietro Caramello, ed., *Summa Theologiae* (Turin: Marietti, 1952) II-II, q11, a. 4, ad. 1.

¹⁵ “.... Outside the Church there is no salvation.” (‘Una vero est fidelium Universalis Ecclesia, *extra quam nullus ominio salvatus*’.) DS 802.

¹⁶ “.... One holy Catholic Church... outside which there is neither salvation nor remission of sins’...” (Unam sanctam Ecclesiam Catholicam *extra quam nec salus est nec remissio peccatorum*) DS 870.

¹⁷ John T. Noonan, Jr. “Development in Moral Doctrine,” in ed., Charles E. Curran, *Reading in Moral Theology – No 13*, p. 292

¹⁸ John Mahoney, *The Making of Moral Theology*, p. 113-114.

a situation where things stand against the Reign of God, the mission of the Church is to challenge people to convert and to conform to the reign of God.