(THY1 - Christian Vision of the Human Person)

INTRODUCTION TO MORAL THEOLOGY

NATURE OF MORAL THEOLOGY

I. Definitions and parts of Theology and of Moral Theology
II. Method
III. Sources
IV. Goal of Moral Theology

1.1 THEOLOGY

Theology is God talk, or the science of God, the knowledge of God through revelation. It is the science of Christian revelation. Theology, St. Anselm said, is “faith seeking understanding.” Theology is “the science which interprets, explains, defends and unfolds divine revelation” (F. Muñiz, O.P.). It has spiritual, pastoral and even “political” dimensions and ought to be always a contextualized, lived and prayerful theology. As theologian H. Urs von Balthasar put it, genuine theology has to be a theology on bended knees and on the march.

In a real sense, every Christian is a theologian – a spontaneous theologian: he or she is obliged to reflect upon his faith and its demands on the various situations of life. According to Protestant theologian Karl Barth, two things are required to be a responsible Christian: to read the newspapers and the Sacred Scriptures daily. Why? One has to read the newspapers to know the situation of the world and of the country, and the Bible to interpret that situation – the signs of the times – according to faith. (In the Catholic tradition, the interpretation of the Sacred Scriptures is done in the community and officially by the Magisterium of the Church). We also have professional theologians. We have, then, a twofold reflection of faith: the spontaneous reflection of every Christian, and the deliberate, methodical and systematic reflection of the theologians.

Theology is specifically one science: God is One. Theology takes up everything within God’s horizon: it deals with God and the things that have relationship with God, either as principle or as end. St. Thomas divides his famous Summa Theologiae into three parts:
First Part (I) studies God; Second Part (II), Man’s Journey to God, and Third Part (III), Christ as the Way to God (Incarnation, Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ, Sacraments, and the Last Things).

Theology has no subjective or specific parts. It has, however, different integral parts - different treatises. We speak of Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology, Theology of Hope, etc. It is mainly divided, according to content, into dogmatic and moral theology. Dogmatic Theology guides us in the contemplation of the truth about God One and Triune and his Creation: it is orthodoxy. Moral Theology points to us how to do the truth in love: it is orthopraxis. There is, indeed, one theology: dogmatic theology has moral consequences, and moral theology possesses dogmatic premises.

Our Christian faith constitutes the basis of our theology. It comprises – like theology – four main elements.
First element: what we must believe – the Creed.
Second: what we have to receive to be able to do all good – the Sacraments.
Third element: what we ought to do – the Commandments.
And fourth: what we should pray and hope for – the Our Father.

Christianity is not a morality, but radically an experience of the paschal mystery. However, Christianity implies necessarily a morality, a way of being and acting. Once a person believes in Christ, she or he will inevitably face this moral question: “What must I do” (Ac 2:37).

1.2 MORAL THEOLOGY

The human person is fundamentally a moral or ethical being, that is, she or he is fundamentally free – and responsible. (We speak here of “moral” or “ethical” interchangeably.) “Moral” is often used in common parlance. People talk of moral (good) and immoral (bad) things; and of moral, immoral or amoral people.
We call immoral a person who knowing what he should do does not do it, or does the opposite: he possesses moral sense but has no moral strength.
We call a person amoral when he does not have a moral sense, that is, he is blind to some moral values.
A person is moral, we say, when he or she knows what is good and usually does it, and what is evil and ordinarily does not do it.

For some Christians, a person is moral if he performs some good deeds. This is true, perhaps, but not necessarily so. A person, a Christian is moral if he or she is good and does good things. The radical question of ethics and Christian ethics is not really what must I do? But rather, what – or who - must I be? (Cornelius van der Poel, C.S.Sp.). A morally good person has good (loving), options, attitudes and actions.

St. Francis says in his life written by Carlo Carreto: “What counts is not to do, but to love.”
According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “Moral Theology studies the human person as the image of God.”

The human person is the image of God by creation and by redemption, and therefore moral theology points out to him the way to be a good image of God, that is, a good creature and child of God. Moral Theology points out to us the way to follow Jesus Christ, the way to be his disciples.

St. Thomas gives a second definition of Moral Theology: “Moral Theology studies the movement of the rational creature towards God.” This definition stresses the fact that life is a movement towards personal and communitarian realization; it is becoming more what one is, a journey to God - to happiness, to perfection, to love.

Moral theology may be defined as: “The science of what man ought to be by reason of what he is” (A. Sertillanges). Indeed, Moral Theology is a science, a normative science): the science of what man ought to be (man is a project, a becoming), by reason of what he is (a creature and child of God). In this definition, the human person becomes the fundamental criterion of ethics and morals. The human person is reality – what he or she is – and possibility – what he or she can become. According to Albert Camus, “Man is the only creature capable of not wanting to be what he is.” The task of Moral Theology is to guide Christians – and men and women of good will – to become more and more good human beings, that is, free and responsible, and good Christians, that is real followers of Christ.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, Vatican City, 1992, 1997) begins the treatise of Christian ethics (or Moral Theology), entitled Life in Christ, with the admirable text of St. Leo the Great: “Christian, recognize your dignity” (CCC, no. 1691). The human person, every human person possesses a unique dignity and inalienable human rights. As human beings and as believers in Christ, we are all social beings, members of the human family and the family or people of God. The People of God, the community of disciples is called to live a moral life, to be missionaries of morality in the community. The Christian community is, according to the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines (PCP II, 1991), a Community-in-Mission that exists in order to evangelize, that is, to proclaim the Good News of Christ. This proclamation includes morality. John Paul II writes in his encyclical Veritatis Splendor or the Splendor of Truth (1993): “Evangelization also involves the proclamation and presentation of morality” (VS, 107; see PCP II, Acts and Decrees, nos. 102-115).

1.3 PARTS OF MORAL THEOLOGY

Ethics is usually divided into General and Special Ethics, and Moral Theology into General and Special Theology. In St. Thomas’ Summa Theologiae, his second part constitutes his Moral Theology, and it is divided into General or Fundamental Moral Theology (I-II), and Special Moral Theology (II-II).
General Theology considers the fundamental moral principles, values and categories while Special Moral Theology discusses the ethics of the person (including bioethics) and social ethics; it takes up, above all, the human and Christian virtues - the moral virtues, the theological virtue and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.

CCC considers Moral Theology in Part Three. This is divided into two sections. Section One (General Moral Theology) develops the following topics: man as the image of God, his vocation to beatitude, freedom, morality, conscience, virtues, sin, social justice, law and grace. Section two discusses the Ten Commandments. The Catechism for Filipino Catholic (1997) studies the moral life of the followers of Christ in Part Two (CBCP, Catechism for Filipino Catholics, Manila: CBCP, 1997).

The most important encyclical on fundamental moral theology is Veritatis Splendor (1993), regarding certain fundamental questions of the Church’s moral teaching, issued by the late John Paul II.

2. SOURCES OF MORAL THEOLOGY

The two main sources of theology and, therefore, of Moral Theology too, are: the Sacred Scriptures and Tradition. While ethics studies human conduct in the light of reason, Moral Theology considers human conduct from the light of reason enlightened by faith. Moral Theology is theology, which is one. Hence, Moral Theology argues mainly from divine authority, that is, from the revelation of faith. As a true science, Moral Theology also uses reason to argue its propositions and premises. It is, then, like dogmatic theology, positive and scientific theology. However, Moral Theology, and much more than dogmatic theology, considers also human experience: the collective moral knowledge through the ages, and the particular problems and “signs” of every age. In the context of a possible global ethics, Christians work with other believers and non-believers in the search for common human values, and equal human dignity and rights. Moral Theology builds on human ethics; it connects with revelation (faith) and culture (natural theology); it is a bridge that links both.

In the context of Christian revelation, it is important to point out the substantial relevance of the Magisterium of the Church. Vatican II: “The Church is, by the will of God, the teacher of the truth. It is her duty to give utterance to and authoritatively to teach, that Truth which is Christ himself, and also to declare and confirm by her authority those principles of the moral order which have their origin in nature itself” (Vatican II, Dignitatis Humanae, DH, 14; see Id., Dei Verbum, DV, 10).

In the modern context, we may define Moral Theology, with Timothy O’Connell thus: “The portion of the theological enterprise which attempts to discern the implications of revelation for human behavior, to answer the question: “How ought we, who have been gifted by God, to live?” Indeed, God has gifted us! By ourselves, we can do little, in fact, nothing. But we are not alone: God is with us, and with him, as the psalmist tells us, we
can scale any wall (cf. Ps 18:29). With the grace and love of God – offered to all - we can do almost everything: Saint Paul asked himself: If Christ is with us who or what can be against us? No one and nothing! (Cf. Rom 8:31-34.) Unlike ethics, Christian ethics relies on God’s grace and the help of prayer.

3. METHOD OF MORAL THEOLOGY

The way of Moral Theology, then, is faith and reason, or reason enlightened by faith: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth” (John Paul II Fides et Ratio, FR, 1998). Traditionally, we spoke of positive, scientific and casuistic methods of Moral Theology. We also speak of moral reflection and of moral analysis.

*Moral reflection* is ordered to appreciate, understand, interpret, and solve the moral problems of our times. It contemplates man in his mystery and in his freedom and responsibility – in the process of self-realization. It builds on a system and a scheme of moral theory and praxis.

*Moral analysis* is achieved through various concrete ways or methods: the analytic method (conceptual), the descriptive method (experimental), the cause-effect method, the evaluative method, the comparative method, etc.

4. THE GOAL OF MORAL THEOLOGY

Ethics is the science of correct doing. Christian ethics is the science of correct Christian “doing” – doing the truth of faith in love. Christian ethics or Moral Theology is the science of Christian praxis.

The goal of ethics is human happiness through right living. The goal of Christian ethics or Moral Theology is eternal salvation through a life in Christ, who is the perfect model of humanity.

Moral Theology tries to help us do the right thing in our lives. It can give direction and meaning to our lives. It teaches us the art of living: “How all and each one can be happy” (R. Larrañeta). Moral Theology helps the human person, the Christian journey towards happiness.

The *ultimate goal* of Christian ethics is the beatific vision of God in heaven in the company of Our Lady and the saints and our relatives and friends - and of all God’s friends.

The *proximate goal* of Moral Theology is to develop “moral adulthood,” that is, the ability to make decisions and to assume responsibility (L. Monden, S.J.).
Responsibility – a key word in contemporary ethics and Moral Theology – is the ability to respond to God, to oneself, to others and to nature.

The immediate goal of Moral Theology is continuing conversion, integral liberation, or holiness. This ongoing conversion implies to be reconciled with God and neighbor (2 Cor 5:20), and “to put on the new self (Eph 4:24; Col 3:10). It means to say no to selfishness – to sin -, and yes to love. In the moral life, philosopher Iris Murdoch says, “the enemy is the fat relentless ego.”

We Christians study Moral Theology not merely, or mainly, to learn about moral problems and their answers, but also, and mainly, to love God and neighbor. As Benedict Ashley said, “The fundamental principle of moral theology is: ‘Love God and your neighbor as yourself.’” We study Christian ethics to know, yes, but in St. John the Evangelist’s sense: for the evangelist knowledge is the engagement of faith, and to know means to experience, to realize faith. The goal of Moral Theology is, in the language of St. Thomas, to help us know and love virtue. After all, Peter Kreeft asked himself: “What is the purpose of ethics?” His answer: “To be virtuous.”

Moral Theology attempts to pronounce a transforming word. It questions society and commits itself to its positive transformation. Moral Theology, or theological ethics, is oriented to orthopraxis, correct practice: “To know and not to do is not to know” (Buddhist saying). In a world permeated by poverty, violence and injustice, Moral Theology has an important word to say – a word to transform the world into a just and fraternal world.

God’s question to Cain, “what have you done” to your brother? Questions all humans, and Christians in particular – questions us about the men and women and children (born and unborn) who are killed or die of hunger or merely survive while some of our brothers and sisters waste the resources God created for all.

The end of Moral Theology is to help us walk by the way of God. “Ask where the good way is and take it and find peace for your soul” (Jr 6:16). The Psalmist prayed: “You will reveal the path of life to me” (Ps 16:11). Paul before conversion persecuted those who followed the Way (Ac 22:4) (Ac 9:1-5). What is the Way? It is “the way of salvation” (Ac 16:17), or “the way of the Lord” (Ac 18:25). In a real sense, Christian morality is the morality of the Way. And the Way for us is Christ (Jn 14:6). In truth, “the following of Christ is the essential and primordial dimension of Christian morality” (John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, VS, no. 19). Jesus the Christ is the Way - the way of love (I Cor, Chapt. 13).

When all is said and done, what matters in ethics and in Christian ethics is love - God’s love and our loving response to it. Love (and the other virtues as mediations of love) gives real value to all our deeds: we journey to heaven with steps of love (Saint Augustine). On the way, and at the end - at the end of every day, of every year, of our life -, we shall be examined on love: on love of God, love of ourselves, love of neighbor, preferential love for the poor, sick and abandoned neighbor, love of creation. According to Saint John of the Cross, in the evening of life, we will be examined on love. Only on love!