On-going formation on moral theology and implications for mission

The theme of the conference was “In the Currents of History: from Trent to the Future.” Half of the participants were lay people. It points to the dramatic democratization of moral theology. In the past this was exclusively the domain of clergy that prepared them for confession. The “feminization of moral theology” came as a shocker. It was the meeting of gender and moral theology and it was pure delight for some and maybe for others a dreadful moment. There was also a big number of African moral theologians and they too made their mark in noting the absence of the black body in moral discourse.

Let me share some key points in all these sessions. It is not a summary but some significant themes raised by the presenters from Asia, Africa, Latin America, US and Europe.

In the presentation of Religion, Ethics and Dialogues, Archbishop Bruno Forte of Chieti-Vasto, Italy describes the present state of the Church and society with four fluid metaphors: shipwrecked, liquidity, metissage and Babel tower. All these images reflect the human condition of crisis, confusion, division, and flexibility. It is the end of positivistic discourse and universal claims and the beginning of post-modern realities of differences and various sources of authority and wisdom. It is the end of hegemonic discourse both in public and private life. In this context, he offers the reality of the incarnation as a way out to the crisis facing humanity – the incarnation is the alternative to build an ethics of solidarity, an ethics filled with gratuity and responsibility, an ethics grounded on transcendence and respect for human dignity.

This was followed by Laurentin Magesa of Kenya who talked about the disastrous consequences of the Council of Trent on African soil. Roman Catholicism came to Africa tied with colonization and westernization. It turned the local churches into images of the West and stunted their growth to become fully local.

Regina Ammich-Quinn of Germany presented the crisis facing the Church on sexual abuses of the clergy. She said that the Church is faced with the cultural reality of pride and shame. The officials of the Church do not see the issue as structural betrayal of trust but as personal issues of erring priests. Seeing that way means keeping institutional pride or protecting the institution as primordial value and hence keeping power and the status quo. Seeing sexual violence as a shameful event and a grave abuse of power may lead to the realization of what needs to be addressed structurally and to look at the rejection of shame from the viewpoint of the gospel. Jesus led marginalized persons out of shame and made them discover the inclusivity of God’s grace and love. But even the institutional Church is caught in the ways of the world and not fully in the way of God’s Reign.

The Archbishop Reinhard Marx from Germany who spoke of the “Future of Catholic Theological Ethics” mentioned freedom, responsibility, and democracy but not a word
about the impact of sexual abuses on the Church. It was not unintentional; it was deliberate. No wonder there was protest in the auditorium why there was no open forum after his talk.

In the choice between two parallel plenary sessions, the account of history and missing voices and the interaction of history and theological ethics, I chose the former. I was interested at the missing voices. In every historical and cultural setting, there are forgotten and missing voices like women, black and indigenous views. Bryan Massingale, a black diocesan priest and theology professor at Marquette University in the US remarked that the black experience is rendered invisible in Church’s discourse. White moral theologians have not acknowledged, have opposed and resisted black moral agency. There is a shocking absence on the black body and voice. He articulates why this is so; embarrassment on slavery and colonization, visibility of white’s power and superiority, unconscious failure to care for the minority and selective indifference or socialization in racism. He adds incisively how colour defines vision and how race defines social relations. There is a need to look deeper at cultural meanings and symbols. There is a need to name entrenched racism as cultural evil and not simply a structural issue. The challenge is to move away from discursive reasoning and the imperative to lament on the distortion of history. We are called to lament on the denial, numbness, and erasure of the black body. Why lament? “Nobody knows my pain” cries the black person. Only lamentation will lead us to shared pain, deliverance and emergence of a new form of solidarity with those who are marginalized. During the open forum, somebody asked how would black moral theology look like? Bryan made a rough sketch how moral theology from a black perspective would be: joyful and not judgmental, deeply filled and animated with hope in the face of despair, deeply suspicious of dominant and universal moral discourse and the unveiling of hypocrisy in moral claims.

I found the presentation of Bryan a voice from the wilderness, a voice that we all needed to hear, a voice that reveals how one’s colour defines one’s interpretation and understanding of moral issues. He was eloquent and confident; he was calm and not vengeful; he made his point without making anyone guilty because he spoke from the heart of someone who feels what it means to carry a black skin. We can hold the same passion when we take into account other persons of colour who bear the same discrimination and mistreatment from powerful voices.

Lisa Cahill in her fifteen minute presentation like most of the speakers led us to consider the theological foundations for ethics or what she says “the ethical foundations for theology.” She started with a re-reading of three doctrines, namely, creation, Christ and cross from the perspective of the poor. In the doctrine of creation (Gen. 1-23), the past interpretation revolved around the issue of disobedience and the morality of freedom and responsibility. The notion of being co-creator led to an interventionist ethic of dominating the earth. Seeing creation from a more relational perspective means that creation is our collective care for the earth and how we need to take care and share the resources of God’s creation. Justice for the earth is equally exercising justice within and among human communities. The doctrine of Christ in the past had to defend his divinity.
Today what maybe more significant is to stress the humanity of Jesus as found in the synoptic gospels. Jesus’ solidarity with the marginalized is the moral challenge today. In the theology of the cross in the past, there was too much emphasis on penal substitution – only Jesus can save us from our sins. The shift is to see the cross as God’s solidarity with the victims of history. Rereading the three doctrines from the underside of history, leads us to move from cheap grace to the greater call for solidarity with the poor and the excluded in our world today.

Margaret Farley discussed the issue of moral reasoning by asking the question what is moral obligation? What is this experience of obligation? She mentions four elements involved in the process of moral responsibility: claim, free choice, love, and justice. There is a claim or demand that one experiences and perceived to be legitimate and justifiable. It has too a liberating appeal not just to avoid sin but more as way of being authentic. What follows is a free choice among the alternatives that present themselves to the moral agent. One basically chooses what one desires – an affective tendency. There is a complexity of desires but at the end every choice is a choice of what and how we love. Love is not always a solution but a problem since it is confrontation of what is creative and what is destructive, of what is true and what is distorted. The norm here is the concrete reality of the beloved, namely historical and social context, personhood and the sacredness of the non-human creation. Finally justice is the measure of true love. Rendering what is his/her due is the measure of love. To love is to ask the question is it just? What is called for when we discuss moral obligation is the imperative of moral listening.

Finally, Benezet Bujo, Congolese priest and theology professor from the University of Fribourg, Switzerland talked about the universality of moral norms from the perspective of African worldview and ethics. He talks about the centrality of community which includes the living, the dead, and with God. Community is ubuntu! "I am because You are. You are because I am." This philosophy challenges the Cartesian cogito that measures life’s values and destiny from a personalist if not individualistic viewpoint. ubuntu or “I care for you; we care for our community” – is a philosophy which, among other factors, helped South Africa to avoid the bloodbath that the world feared after the fall of the apartheid regime. During the open forum when someone from India asked him how universal is his African ethics? He playfully responded that we all become white when we die.

My notes are not reflective of the whole program. There were more and much more. Maybe what took place is the reality of plurality of moral perspectives and embodied narratives and norms. Fr. Bryan Massingale captures the deeper reality of our stories when he says "We act justly not because we are intellectually convinced, but because we are passionately moved. Compassion moves the will to justice." Or from Julie Clague, a woman theologian from the University of Glasgow, who presented the impact of gender on the future of theological ethics. She gently and forcefully articulated a wondering meeting of gender and moral theology – not a meeting of equals since morality was an exclusive domain of priests confessors. She moved away from rational moral discourse to a moving story of the encounter of gender and moral theology – it was not a love at
first sight. Will this meeting end with a beautiful love story? Maybe not but the world has changed as highlighted by Gemma Tulud Cruz who presented a paper on “Toward an Ethic of Risk: Catholic Ethics and Immigration Reform” where she pointed out that contemporary participation in the struggle for human dignity, human rights, and the common good inevitably entails the recognition that we cannot guarantee decisive changes and the achievement of desired ends in the near future or even in our lifetime; we can only possibly create a matrix or conditions in which further actions are possible or the possibility for desired changes are probable. And there’s more local contribution. Jun Bombongan from de La Salle University gave a talk on “Teaching Casuistry: Promoting a Transformative Learning Experience for the Facebook Generation. Fr. Roland Tuazon, CM, who presented the “Malasakit sa abang iba: Beyond the modern interpretation of the Filipino value of Pakikipagkapwa, says that what is more is the moral call of compassion of what is deeply human and that is not simply relationship with others but the seamless interconnectedness of all beings.

What are the implications of moral theology to our understanding of mission today? Or put differently and borrowing from Lisa Cahill, what are the ethical foundations of doing mission in our present world? Let me highlight some key points for our missional engagement:

1. To see mission from the underside of history. This is not new for us. We are called to be with the poor and the marginalized. They are the subjects of history and mission and not objects of charity and pastoral plans.
2. To take into account the missing voices in doing mission. Racism is not only between black and white but maybe among us when we look down on our own culture and compare it with Western values and Cartesian discourses and when we are not suspicious of our own biases against other cultures. Or when we are not critical of our own cultural behaviour.
3. Rereading of Catholic doctrines from the margins of history or herstory. Are we narrating our salvation story from the eyes of those we are called to serve or are we still caught by traditional formulations of the faith, sacraments, and morality? Are we taking seriously the task of inculturation by taking the symbols, rituals and wisdom of the marginalized and the excluded?
4. Are we still caught by the Christendom mentality of doing mission? Are we critical of our superior/ elitist/ educated outlook over those we are called to serve? Have we started moving to pluralist, inter-cultural and embodied narratives?
5. To have a second look at power and how it corrupts mission and the Church. Power is tied to pride. Are we too part of the structural betrayal of trust in the Church and in the institute? Do we acknowledge our shame as we confront our own weaknesses and sinfulness?
6. The centrality of community in creating a different world. Maybe this is the most demanding task facing us. A dream and a faith-quest captured by our affective desire of being friends and disciples. In this area we need to move from rational discourse to affectivity or lamentation if need be to move away from the toxic spirit of resentments and loss securities to the desired community of friends and disciples.
There are many ethical challenges of doing mission today. What I shared is my view on what morally matters in our present social contexts. Maybe we need to share our own struggle and pain as we grapple with the call to discipleship and with the collective dream of sharing in God’s mission.

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