

Infallibility on moral issues?

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Theological Ethics of Life (Vatican Publishing House, 2022, pp. 517, euro 30) is the book published by the Pontifical Academy for Life containing a free, frank and open debate among moral theologians – based on a Basic Text - in which all the issues related to the ethics of life are addressed. There has been much discussion about the book in recent weeks, sometimes focusing on specific passages, such as the debate on the relationship between love and procreation, while losing sight of the wider horizon.

On these aspects, one of the drafters of the Basic Text and participant in the conference, Fr. Maurizio Chiodi, a professor in Bergamo, Milan and Rome at the John Paul II Pontifical Theological Institute for Marriage and Family Sciences, answered some questions to clarify the meaning of the work done.

Question. Pope Francis said that one cannot do theology, even moral theology, when there are boundaries in place. This is a clear message about the importance of freedom of academic discussion and research in the field of theology. Is this interpretation right? Why is it necessary to reiterate it? Why has academic freedom been held back? Certainly, theologians are in relation with the Magisterium in their research. But what is the balance between freedom of research and the Magisterium?

Father CHIODI. The pope's statement is part of the discourse on the development of dogma and morality, regarding which he recalled the hermeneutic criterion of Vincent of Lérins and within this framework he stated that one cannot do theology when there are boundaries in place. For my part, I would say that theology has no "absolute" freedom: its *norma normans* ("the rule that rules") is Revelation, constantly reinterpreted and made present in Tradition.

Regarding the relationship between theology and magisterium, I want to recall that after the patristic period, in which the figures of the pastor/bishop and the doctor/theologian coincided, the task of the pastors, cum Petro and sub Petro, was viewed as reciprocal, even if with different tasks, with respect to theology. The episcopal and pontifical magisterium has always intervened after theological debates, that were often very heated, as the great Christological and Trinitarian questions of the early centuries. The ecclesial magisterium, therefore, requires theology, and the latter in turn has the autonomy that comes from its being intelligence of the faith, and in that sense, it cannot be reduced to commenting on the magisterium, although it cannot prescind from it, just as both cannot prescind from the *sensus fidei* ("sense of the faith"), as *Lumen gentium* 12 says. It is ultimately up to the ecclesiastical magisterium to determine whether a theological statement conforms to the truth of the gospel or not, but this implies precisely a free discussion, at least to the extent that a doctrine is affirmed by the ordinary and universal magisterium in an "authentic" way, but not in a definitive and infallible way. Now, it is a common opinion among theologians that the ecclesiastical magisterium has not spoken on moral issues in an infallible way so far, although of course this does not exclude that it may do so in the future.

-Are there any issues that cannot be discussed? For example, these days we read that the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* is 'infallible'. Is this really the case?

A number of theologians were quick to claim that the teaching of *Humanae Vitae* was infallible, while many others, the vast majority, claimed that the theological feature - that is, the authoritative teaching - of an encyclical does not belong to the infallible magisterium. *Humanae Vitae*, like any encyclical, including *Veritatis Splendor*, is an authoritative document, but with no claim to infallibility. I believe that, in the pope's statement recalled at the beginning, it is possible to read this conviction. When it comes to *Humanae Vitae*, and the earlier stance contained in *Casti connubii* - which was even stronger - we are in the realm of *doctrina reformabilis* ("reformable doctrine"). This does not legitimize hastily substituting one's own idea with the teaching of the magisterium, claiming for oneself an infallibility denied to the magisterium, but it does open up theological discussion, within the Church, and even the possibility of dissent, both for the individual believer and the theologian. Such a possibility, with due conditions, is not excluded even by *Veritatis Splendor* 113. Going even further into the substance of this matter, the reason why some argue *Humanae Vitae*'s infallibility is "intrinsically evil acts" (*intrinsece mala*).

-Meaning? What is meant by "intrinsically evil acts"?

In the 1970s, during a bitter debate on how to provide a foundation for the moral norms, that is, on the value and meaning of norms, some theologians - later condemned as "proportionalists" by *Veritatis Splendor* - argued that it is impossible to qualify as morally evil according to its species - its "object" - the deliberate choice of certain kinds of behaviour or specific acts, apart from a consideration of the intention for which the choice is made or the totality of the foreseeable consequences of that act for all persons concerned. For example, they said, if "telling the truth" to a sick person leads him or her to despair, it is better to keep silent or lie: the good effect, the hope of the sick person, becomes morally and proportionally more important than the bad effect that would result from telling the truth. Against these theologians, others - called deontologists - argued that there are acts which, being intrinsically evil, are condemned *semper et pro semper* ("always and everywhere without exceptions") and that nothing in the world, not even the pope, can make them good. Now, contraception is considered an intrinsically evil act, along with many others, as can be read in the long list in *Veritatis Splendor* 80.

-And how should we judge those discussions?

It seems to me that, during that debate, two instances have emerged that demand to be both accepted, in different ways. The teleological theologians demand to evaluate effects and circumstances - without going so far as to be extremist like some relativists, condemned by *Veritatis Splendor*, and the deontological theologians advocate for the unconditional validity of the good - without, however, falling into the intellectualism or legalism of some deontologists. How to combine these two instances without rejecting either one or the other, finding some common ground between them? This is difficult. For my part, I believe that we should not deny the existence of intrinsically evil acts, but that we need to think together about what an act is at its source, overcoming an objectified interpretation of it, that is, one that is independent of any circumstance, effect and intention in the actions of those involved. Therefore, a more comprehensive, circumstantial evaluation is needed, which cannot be simply limited to the "legal" status of norms. After all, an act as "intrinsically evil" as killing has always been - rightly - interpreted as "do not kill an innocent person", introducing a distinction - who is innocent? - that relates to the circumstances and intentions naturally inscribed in human relationships marked by violence. A similar argument

could be made for what is implied in the pastoral practice introduced by *Amoris Laetitia*, according to which the sexual relationship between the divorced and remarried is not necessarily adulterous.

- Sometimes, when referring to the popes, people talk about John Paul II or Benedict XVI, or both. As if there was no other teaching, especially with regard to bioethical issues. What should the theologian's work be to explain, to investigate, to teach? And how can the faithful orient themselves?

The history of the Church, we know, is very long. I do not see the wisdom in pitting one pope against another. The magisterium itself, throughout history, has known several reforms without disruption, and even some "discontinuity", but always in the fundamental continuity of reference to the Gospel. Sometimes, on individual ethical issues, there can be a variety of opinions, when we talk about *doctrina reformabilis*. This happened recently with the death penalty and the "just war" or in the past with lending at interest etc...

Regarding bioethics, a recent discipline that has arisen because of the many dilemmas related to medical and technological practice, in my opinion, before defining it at the level of the magisterium, it would be good to deepen and discuss it on the theological level, without rushing to value judgments and taking into account the necessary discernment of situations on the part of personal conscience. This would require caution in the interventions of the magisterium and critical attention in theology.

We should also not forget that in moral dilemmas, the so-called "cases of conscience" - situations in which the difference between good and evil is not so clear-cut - there were many conflicting and even contradictory opinions among moralists from 1500 to 1700. In this case, the magisterium intervened only later, at the urging of the Universities of Paris and Louvain, precisely to authoritatively settle those theological disputes.

-*Theological Ethics of Life* is a 517-page book that brings together the results of a conference where several theologians discussed a basic text. Contained inside are all the issues of human life. How can the readers orient themselves in reading the book? What are its most significant aspects?

To present this text in a few lines would be presumptuous. I think that, between the powerful work on the Basic Text, the result of a collective effort over many intense months, and the three fruitful days of the Workshop, with the speeches of the Discussants and Respondents, there was a remarkable theological exercise - as has been said, in the style of the *quaestio disputata*. Thus, in the book we find a wise balance between a text and the discussion that ensued, with a plurality of voices, even discordant voices, but lively and dialectically fruitful ones. To focus on the Basic Text, I would like to emphasize its overall structure on the theme of life: starting from Pope Francis' solicitations, we drew on the treasure of Scripture, then we deepened the analysis of the present time, in which the recipient of Revelation lives, and studied the past, which belongs to us, with the hermeneutics of the theological tradition and the positions of the ecclesiastical magisterium. Within this framework, we focused on two radical issues: the circular relationship between ethics and anthropology and the link between conscience, norm and discernment. In such a fundamental theological and moral perspective, the major theological questions related to the care of life and health in our common home are examined. The conclusion is devoted to a formidable theological fresco, showing how evangelical accomplishment is written into the drama of history. Only in this systematic reflection can we understand some of the issues that have provoked a great deal of

attention and controversy, such as the issues of responsible procreation, the end of life, the difference between ethics and law, and the meaning of discernment.

-Human life has become a source of ideological and even ecclesial conflict. It is difficult to make people understand that the defense of life is the defense of all life, in all stages. For example, it is difficult to understand that to fight against the death penalty is to defend life. Or to make people understand that denouncing armed conflict means defending life. This happens because economic and propagandistic interests have affected even such crucial issues. What is your opinion on the matter?

Rather than speaking of "defense of life," because this immediately reflects a defensive and apologetic approach, I would emphasize that first and foremost human life asks to be received, welcomed and thought about. Human life is not reducible to a "regional," biological, psychological, social or political, economic, ecological or global sphere. The contributions of the human sciences are very important and indispensable, but they should not make us forget that life poses a radical question. From the question - what is life? - arises awe and wonder, and this activates thoughts, actions, emotions and relationships in inseparable unity. Life is the wonderful experience of discovering ourselves and our fellow human beings. We are invited to care for each other, within our common home, which is the world we live in. It is clear that in such a perspective life has a religious connotation, which refers back to its origin and its destination: it is not us humans who give ourselves life and we are urged to give an account of such a gift ... We Christians are called to bear witness to this anthropological evidence: the uniqueness and singularity of human life is a precious and mortal gift, which asks us to respond with grateful commitment, at all levels, which you mentioned and without ever forgetting any of them.

-In relation to some aspects of *Humanae Vitae*, someone has written that the current Pope alone does not have the authority to change the doctrine. Yet we know, from the studies of several historians and from consulting the archives, that Paul VI took a position against contraception even in complete disagreement with the Commission of theologians called on several occasions to study the subject and provide an opinion (in the end the Commission consisted of 73 experts!).

The truly complex circumstances that led to the encyclical *Humanae Vitae* are now well known. I believe that, beyond the important historical investigation, today theology has reached a wide-ranging depth of reflections, insights and concepts, that allow us to go one step further, which does not contradict *Humanae Vitae*, but adopts its spirit, without taking a norm literally: procreation is an act of responsibility, which takes place within the marriage relationship between man and woman. This mutual gift is the origin of every child.

In face of the grace of begetting, parents discover themselves as receivers and actors, recipients and donors. This is the wonderful experience that *Humanae Vitae* asks us to cherish. We have tried to reflect, both in the Basic Text and during the workshop, on how this experience is to be defined in the present conditions and with the possibilities offered by science - not without fascination and deception. The fruit of this work seems to me to be a synodal theological act of great ecclesial responsibility. As Christians we are called and urged to respond to the gift and blessing of life, received and given back, becoming witnesses of it for everybody. Practical wisdom - the *ratio practica* of St. Thomas - helps us discern how to respond to God's gift, which is life, in a concrete way.

-Today, with the advent of social media, anyone can support any thesis, even bizarre and baseless ones, and find followers. How can one do theology in such a situation?

Theology flows from faith: I cannot believe without understanding, just as my understanding deepens everyone's faith. Every believer is called to this by virtue of their baptism, although it is clear that - as in all things - this task requires dialogue, competence, passion and dedication. The risk of social media is that they could accentuate a tendency to "sports cheering", where one neglects the depth of thought and goes straight to conclusions, with the risk that the latter confirm prejudice. In addition to this, the flaw is that everything can be said in a tweet, forgetting the effort and rigor of thinking, searching for the ever-renewed practical forms to bear witness to the faith in the gospel of Jesus.