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Theology and Spirituality in the Ecclesial Conception of Charles Curran

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Abstract

The Church today faces the “spirit of the time” (Zeitgeist). Charles Curran proposes that Catholic theology respond to contemporary challenges, such as postmodernism and liberation theology. To create a “global ethics”, he suggests certain framework themes: attitude, model, person, virtues, principles and consciousness, which the theology he promotes acquires the character of a systematic discipline through. These moral, and fundamental values help the Catholic Church, which is challenged to recognize the specificity and diversity much more than before, to maintain “a certain universality and unity” at the same time.

Keywords

Tradition, revelation, Scripture, law, morality, papal teaching, Jerome, Thomas Aquinas, Kant, H. Richard Niebuhr, postmodernity, attitude, person, virtues, principles, conscience

I. The Church and the Spirit of the Time

In his synthesis work “The Catholic Moral Tradition Today”, Charles E. Curran first analyses the existential context which the Roman Catholic Church must carry out its mission in. In the general conditions of

desacralization, the ecclesial context is no happier either: the most acute dangers in the Catholic approach are related to the temptation that Christianity conforms too much to the “spirit of the time” (Zeitgeist). This belief determined the Church Fathers to take a firm stand and assert, like St. Ambrose of Milan: “Let us be very careful that our fall does not become a wound for the Church”¹. We face the alignment of the Catholic Church to the Power, as well as to the people who have “affluence and influence”². The accommodation of the Church with the desacralized state of the world leads to the desacralization of the Church itself, as well as to the loss of her evangelical message. That is why, “the [Catholic] Church must not conform to a world that forgets the goodness of God faces human limitations, the sinfulness of men, and the inability of the world to conform to the perfection of His Kingdom”³.

Curran proposes some “antidotes” to the current state of affairs: the call to holiness, the call to permanent conversion, the recognition of the prophetic element in the Catholic Church, as well as the vocation to bear Christian witness in the evangelical virtues themselves. In the Orthodox Church, the virtuous believer (the Saint), that is, the one who has communion with God and shares in His gifts, being clothed with the Holy Spirit, is the measure (μέτρο) of the Christian spirituality and pastoral care⁴.

Catholic research must respond to contemporary challenges, the most important being postmodernism and liberation theology. Postmodernism attacks the theory of universality in morality; In practice, it fights for justice and equality in favour of groups that have been marginalized and oppressed by society as a whole, and also brings to light the dangers of universalism and essentialism. Postmodernism disapproved the modern acceptance of the rational, objective, neutral, free-axiological and universalist perspective, belonging to the ideal connoisseur. In fact, postmodernism only points out that there is no such gnoseological perspective of the ideal connoisseur, our knowledge being neither neutral, nor objective, nor detached from values, since it does not have the character of universality. Everyone who appears on the world stage is marked by their own foundations. History is

¹ Sf. AMBROZIE AL MILANULUI, *De virginitate* 8, 48, PL 16, 278D.

² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, Georgetown University Press, Washington, D.C., 1999, p.15.

³ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.16.

⁴ Sf. IOAN GURĂ DE AUR, *La I Corinteni*, Omilia 2, 3, PG 61, 22.

not an objective science, nor should it be forgotten that “history has always been written by the victors”. Postmodernism states that universalism and essentialism, linked to the Enlightenment, had disastrous effects on the needs and concerns of the poor, marginalized, as well as the oppressed. These people were either forgotten, or absorbed by the dominant ideology. Liberation theology, which begins in Latin America with the experience of the oppressed, recognizes that the Christian God is not a neutral observer, detached from values, but He hears the cry of the poor as the Psalmist reminds us. Even if the observations of postmodernism are common sense, Curran tries to give the appropriate reply to this system of conceptions in which there is no place for universality and “the possibility of a universal ethics or morality is indeed disputed”⁵.

On the one hand, the response of Catholic ethics to the challenges of postmodernism and liberation theology would consist in the transition from deductive (syllogistic) methodology to inductive methodology (“the one looking for the best hypothesis, rather than absolute certainty”⁶), and on the other hand, in the transition from the classicism of tradition to a vision of historical consciousness. Curran concludes there is a need for a “global ethic”⁷, the Catholic Church being challenged to recognize specificity and diversity much more than before, while maintaining “a certain universality and unity”.

II. Framework Themes for a Systematic Theology

To this end, Curran uses certain framework themes: attitude, model, person... which make the theology he promotes to acquire the character of a systematic discipline.

a. The Attitude

Attitude is “the first logical step in moral theology”⁸: the moral posture, the horizon of psychological and moral expectation, the fundamental angle of vision that determines the maximum field of view, represents the starting

⁵ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.20.

⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.21.

⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.24.

⁸ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.30.

point of Moral Theology and at the same time the most important factor of moral knowledge; attitude determines how we perceive and become aware of the world around us.

Proposed attitudes: 1. James Sellers proposes an attitude of Christian ethics as “understanding of salvation or totality which involves the movement from promise to perfection”⁹. 2. James Gustafson proposes a perspective in which ethics starts from the understanding of Jesus Christ as Lord, Sanctifier, Redeemer, Model and Teacher¹⁰. 3. Since “we all know the temptation of Christians to see Jesus Christ in their own image and likeness”¹¹, it might be better to start the ethical research with a fundamental attitude of love; 4. Charles Curran proposes un “horizon involving the five Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and the destiny of the resurrection”¹².

The ecclesiological conception which all these attitudes would manifest within was substantially changed after the Second Vatican Council: In pre-Vatican II ecclesiology the Church was seen triumphantly, as a perfect society, and the kingdom of God on earth; “against this overestimation, Vatican II rightly insisted on the sinful and pilgrim nature of the Church”¹³. The fundamental attitude chosen by Curran avoids both the optimism before Vatican II and the ecclesiological pessimism induced by the Council:

“Based on the five Christian mysteries, this attitude avoids the danger of both optimism and pessimism. It is confident and realistic in its hopes for humanity and what it can hope to accomplish, but he also recognizes that the human limit, sinfulness, and lack of eschatological fullness will always characterize life in this world”¹⁴.

Curran identified four sources of wisdom which the research of moral theology is based on: Scripture, Tradition, Reason, and Experience¹⁵.

⁹ James SELLERS, *Theological Ethics*, New York, Macmillan, 1968, pp. 54-65.

¹⁰ James M. GUSTAFSON, *Christ and the Moral Life*, New York, Harper and Row, 1968, pp. 237-248.

¹¹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.31.

¹² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp.33-34.

¹³ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.44.

¹⁴ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.47.

¹⁵ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp.48-55.

b. The Deontological, Teleological and Responsibility Model

The ethical model prescribes the criteria of being moral and confers the guidelines of fulfilment in the moral life. There are: 1. the deontological model, which sees the moral life especially in terms of duty, law and obligation; 2. the teleological model, which understands the moral life as being in search of finalities, goals, of ideals; and 3. the model of responsibility, which understands moral life as being claimed by a higher court¹⁶. Charles Curran developed the model of responsibility, belonging to the thinker H. Richard Niebuhr¹⁷, as following: 4. the model of responsible relationality, which has as axiological criteria the personal claims within the relations with God, with others, with the world, as well as with oneself.

The deontological model made a career in transcendental philosophy thanks to Kant. The Koenigsberg thinker raised the categorical imperative to the rank of universal principle of moral life¹⁸. Catholic theology has witnessed the dispute between rigorism and laxity precisely because of the notion of moral duty and conditional obedience, the framework being the deontological model, then the partial solutions of probabilism and probabiliorism¹⁹, - in which the possibilities of derogation, compromise and descent from the categorical imperative of the moral law are weighed.

The fundamental axiological criterion within the deontological model is obedience: obedience is the primordial virtue.

“Obedience becomes the first virtue within the legal model. A legal model tends towards an extrinsic morality, in which something becomes good because it has been imposed (commanded)... I [however] insist on an intrinsic morality: something is imposed (commanded) because it is good”²⁰.

The teleological model is based on success: “something is good if it leads you to the goal and bad if it prevents you from reaching your goal”²¹.

¹⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.60.

¹⁷ H. Richard NIEBUHR, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, New York, Harper & Row, 1963, pp.47-67.

¹⁸ A se vedea Immanuel KANT, *Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals*, Indianapolis, Hackett, 1993.

¹⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.63.

²⁰ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.65.

²¹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.66.

Along with his natural and philosophical theology, Thomas Aquinas developed a teleological model that is known to this day, and which is still a point of reference for moral life. Human acts come from passions, which are divided into concupiscible (lust), irascible (quickness), and general. The principles which our acts derive from, come from stable habits or dispositions to act in a certain way. Good habits are called virtues, and bad habits are vices. Thomas Aquinas had one of the best developed ethical systems, dealing with issues such as axiology, passions, theory of virtue, normative ethics, applied ethics, law and grace.

“For Thomas, the law in general is not an act of will, but an act of reason... The law belongs primarily to practical reason, not to the will. The eternal law does not represent the will of God, but rather the divine wisdom that directs all actions and movements to their own finality... divine reason is a law if it directs all things to their own finality. Natural law is the rational participation of the creature in the eternal law... God the Creator made all things strive for their ultimate finality in accordance with the divine plan of God’s practical reason. The same God has given human beings their reason so that human reason, reflecting on human nature and God’s creation, can understand how God wants us to act in this world. To determine what God wants, one does not have to immediately go to God and ask. Rather, God has given us reason, which, by reflecting on what God has created, let us know how God wants us to act. Then, human law is primarily an act of reason and not one of the legislator’s will”²².

In Orthodox Patristics, the Fathers founded their pastoral pedagogy on human freedom - as an icon of God.

The extrinsically understood teleological model has degenerated into consequentialism (moral consequence) and utilitarianism. For consequentialism, the good of an action depends only on its consequences. Utilitarianism is a specific form of consequentialism, that is: the last moral criterion concerns the greatest good of the greatest number of people.

Curran’s objections to these teleological models relate to their limitation in the realm of rational and human control. Teleological research is too

²² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp.68-69.

rationalistic, excluding affectivity, emotions, and other aspects of plenary life. Here Curran recalls the discernment of spirits, appealing to Ignatius of Loyola's experiences of acedia and consolation, he reached the grace and light of understanding through²³.

On the other hand, extrinsic teleology illustrated by utilitarianism, sees man only in his creative dimension, emphasizing the human control. But the human person is not only a creator, but also a lover, a storyteller, a listener, an artist. ... "The person understood as a creator is a congenial model for an advanced technological society, but our growing awareness of technology limits also reminds us of this model limits"²⁴. There is also the danger of using the (moral) purpose to justify (immoral) means.

The model of responsibility, developed by H. Richard Niebuhr in several stages is based on the awareness that you are responsible for all your actions. Responsibility involves: (1) the response to an action on us, (2) according to the interpretation of what is happening, (3) with a disposition to account for any reaction to our reaction, and (4) in solidarity with the uninterrupted community of agents (initiators of actions)²⁵. Curran modifies this model "by calling people to initiate actions in the same way they respond to the actions of others. The teleological model could insist on the creativity and initiative of people, but some creativity needs to be incorporated into the model of relationality-responsibility"²⁶. Curran practices here a kind of spiritual eclecticism, similar to philosophical eclecticism, - in which his "own" system of thinking represents the synoptic picture formed by fragments from other philosophies, from other systems, without the composition in question rising to the value of a synthesis.

Research within the model of relationality-responsibility concerns the human person in his multiple relationships with God, with his neighbour, with the world, as well as with his own self. Curran notes with undisguised satisfaction that in 1973, in accordance with the liturgical developments at the Second Vatican Council, the Congregation for Divine Worship published a new ritual for the Mystery of Confession, now called "reconciliation". Or, "even the name of this mystery reflects the shift to a

²³ See Jules TONER, *Discerning God's Will: Ignatius of Loyola's Teaching on Christian Decision Making*, St. Louis, Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1991.

²⁴ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 72.

²⁵ H. Richard NIEBUHR, *The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*, p. 66.

²⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.73.

fuller model of relationality and responsibility. The Mystery of Confession involves multiple reconciliations of the sinner with God, the Church, the neighbour, the self and the world”²⁷. Curran notes that in the Roman Catholic Church “the frequency of the sacramental confession has dropped dramatically”, Catholics being “in danger of losing their sense of sin”. Therefore, a community celebration in which penitents are jointly acquitted would make Catholics more aware of the importance of the realities of sin, penance, return, and reconciliation involving our relationship with God, our loved ones and families, and with the more comprehensive world²⁸.

On the other hand, Curran was disappointed that the hierarchical supreme court has not yet accepted the model of relationality-responsibility regarding sexual issues. He justifies his position by the lie-contraception analogy, stating that under certain conditions contraception would be justified by the need to maintain the relationship between people.

“Traditionally, lying has been judged to be morally erroneous because it violates the God-given purpose of the faculty of speech, which is to put on my lips what is in my mind. In the twentieth century, however, several authors proposed a different basis for the wickedness of lying in order to recognize and correct conflict situations. The faculty of speech must always be seen in relation to the person and to the person’s relationships with others in society. The wickedness of lying lies in the violation of my neighbour’s right to truth. If my neighbour has no right to the truth, then my speech is false, but it is not a lie. Dutch civilians hiding Jews during World War II could tell the Gestapo that there were no Jews in their homes and yet not lie”²⁹.

Curran considers Julius A. Dorszynski’s work on the morality of untruths³⁰, but who can absolutely decide who has and who does not have the right to the truth?

Sexual faculty has the dual purpose of procreation and union in love. But, in a similar way (to the case of the previous circumstantial untruth),

²⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 79.

²⁸ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 80.

²⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 82.

³⁰ See Julius A. DORSZYNSKI, *Catholic Teaching about the Morality of Falsehood*, Washington, D.C., Catholic University of America Press, 1949.

“the sexual faculty should not be absolutized and seen only in itself, but in relation to the person and to the person’s relations to others. Thus, in the issue of artificial contraception for spouses, the welfare of the person and the welfare of the marriage relationship justifies the impediment of the faculty or its acts. A model of relationality-responsibility logically requires a number of changes in contemporary hierarchical teaching on sexuality”³¹.

c. The Person

The person represents another fundamental theme of Curran’s moral theology: existential-moral relations can only be established between persons, which means that the model of responsible relationality must highlight the mystery of the person. Curran rightly observes that the Catholic textbooks of Moral Theology have paid too little attention to the moral person, taking special care of sinful deeds.

“However, in general the Catholic Theological Tradition recognizes the significance of the person and also the various aspects inherent to the person. In traditional Catholic research, grace truly brings about a real and ontological change within the person. Justification or redemption is intrinsic and not just extrinsic reality which God renounces to impute the guilt of the person in question. The person is truly changed and becomes a new creation, a child of God, a sister or a brother of Jesus”³².

In the concept of person, Curran distinguishes between subject and agent. The moral person is both subject and agent, these being his existential hypostases: “Through my actions I form myself as the person I am; and by my deeds I do good or evil in this world”³³. Facts build the person as an ontological subject, the person is seen as an agent when he influences the world through his deeds. Curran considered this distinction in order to analyse the situation of an imperturbable erroneous conscience that makes innocently reprehensible acts, thinking and intending to do good.

³¹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 82.

³² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 87.

³³ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 88.

Human deeds do not only have an effect on things external to man, but, since they are freely chosen, they morally qualify the person who commits them and emphasizes his deep spiritual physiognomy. In the perspective of contemporary theology regarding the human person, salvation is not restricted to the relationship of the ego with Christ, but “looks at the whole person in all its relations”³⁴.

And with regard to contemporary spirituality, Curran notes that Vatican II insisted the evangelical call to holiness is universal. Bernard Häring emphasized the Biblical basis of the conversion, the transformation of the person from the sinner into a servant of the Kingdom of God, who responds to the call of a continuous renewal in the Christian life³⁵. Bernard Lonergan developed the concept of conversion in the light of transcendental philosophy, the call to continuous conversion having the aspects of intellectual conversion (transmutation of the intellect), affective conversion (self-transcendence meaning leaving the narcissistic attitude and self-giving), moral conversion (when self-transformation makes the transition from the pursuit of satisfaction to the pursuit of values), and finally, religious conversion (moral life in love and total self-sacrifice)³⁶. “The Christian’s spiritual and moral life involves the growth within the relationship with God, the world and the other. Deadly sin consists in breaking these relationships... The self reaches fullness and happiness in and through these relationships”³⁷.

Catholic theology understood society and the state through the metaphor of the body: each part of it, each organ has its specific role and function, absolutely necessary for the functioning of the whole.

“From this perspective, Catholic thinking rejected the individualism of the Enlightenment both in religion and in philosophy, politics or economics. In the view shared by many Catholic thinkers, religious liberalism began when Luther separated the individual’s conscience from the Church. Philosophical liberalism exalted human reason (which was now cut off from

³⁴ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 93.

³⁵ Bernard HÄRING, ‘*La conversion*’, *Pastorale du péché*, Ed. Ph. Delhay, Tournai, Belgium, Desclée & Cie, 1961, pp. 65-144.

³⁶ Bernard LONERGAN, *Method in Theology*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1972, pp. 238-244.

³⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.98.

the relationship of God's law), and political liberalism made the will of the majority the ultimate arbiter of what is right or wrong — again denying the role of God's will and law. Economic liberalism has argued that the individual can pursue as much profit as possible, disregarding workers and other people³⁸.

d. Theological Virtues

Virtues are another fundamental theme of Charles Curran's Moral Theology.

“The relationality-responsibility model influences the way one understands the virtues - both the general virtues, which affect our fundamental orientation and all our relationships, and the particular virtues, which change our particular relationships with God, neighbour, world and self³⁹.

The general virtues consist of the three theological virtues: faith, hope, and love, which Curran adds creativity to. Creativity plays a very important role in the Christian's life because he must constantly improvise, seek the ways of morality, deepen and expand his relationships with God, his neighbour, the world, and his own self. Curran appeals to the notion **kairos**, which represents the opportune moment, the special time given by God⁴⁰. Man must respond adequately to the moment of the call from above, and for this he must have the virtue of creativity and spontaneity. Kairos or the opportune moment of grace, which God descends upon us in (Ephesians 5:16; Colossians 4: 5) is the “time of inquiry” and man must be constantly prepared to promptly respond. Curran states that the virtue of creativity must be in tension with the need for fidelity, and man must faithfully respond because God is also faithful to His promise. Curran also refers to the role of imagination - in direct connection with creativity, given that each person is unique, and the imaginary can create the plan and concrete data of waiting for the right moment. But Curran does not assume at all the development of this idea on the role of the imagination, referring only to

³⁸ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 104.

³⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 113.

⁴⁰ Paul NEVENZEIT, “Time”, in: *Sacramentum Verbi: An Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology*, New York, Herder & Herder, 1970, vol. 3, p. 91sq.

theologians who insisted on it: Daniel C. Maguire and Philip S. Keane⁴¹. [The imagination, especially the dramatic one - the inner illustration of the Passion of the Lord - has Jesuit origin and played an important role in the posterity of Ignatius of Loyola⁴². In the Jesuit tradition, the imaginations are updated in an inner theatre in which the subject actually participates in the evangelical events. In the case of the theologians quoted above, the imagination would have the role of configuring this expectation of the opportune moment of divine research (the expectation of *kairos*).]

e. Moral Principles

The principles are another fundamental theme of moral theology, being linked to the concept of casuistry in the Catholic tradition. The principles govern the moral actions in the world, and so the question of the universal principles' existence has arisen: which of those principles are valid for all human beings. For example, postmodernism challenges the existence of universal principles, stating the moral tradition of a specific community generates its own principles.

Before the Second Vatican Council there was a danger of seeing morality almost exclusively in terms of human reason and experience - which are considered the legitimate sources of Christian wisdom and human knowledge in general. Excessive use of these terms has led to

“the failure to recognize the role of faith, grace, Jesus Christ, and Scripture, as well as the tendency to minimize the role of sin. Our task now is to incorporate the fundamental trust of natural law tradition into the full Christian horizon, which in turn encompasses our attitude — the five Christian mysteries of creation, sin, incarnation, redemption, and the destiny of the resurrection”⁴³.

The question is whether there are universal moral principles - immutable rules intrinsically prohibiting bad or erroneous acts - as for

⁴¹ Daniel C. MAGUIRE, *The Moral Choice*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1978, pp. 189-217; See Philip S. KEANE, *Christian Ethics and Imagination: A Philosophical Inquiry*, New York, Paulist, 1984.

⁴² Ioan Petru CULIANU, *Eros și magie în Renaștere*, Ed. Nemira, București 1994, p. 268.

⁴³ Ioan Petru CULIANU, *Eros și magie în Renaștere*, p. 138.

instance the moral norm that prohibits contraception⁴⁴. Curran wants a personalist Catholic approach that takes into account living people who are called to moral standards. Derogations, reductions, exceptions, and even rules should be specific to the people concerned.

Curran resorts to the case study of indirect abortion, a case accepted by the Church's magisterium: "If a pregnant woman has a cancerous uterus, the uterus could be directly removed, even if it unfortunately contains a foetus. The physical causality of the act directly affects or is directed to the cancerous uterus and not to the foetus"⁴⁵. In the case of ectopic pregnancy, the Holy Office expressed and maintained the opinion that the removal of the fallopian tube, which became infected due to the foetus, is an indirect abortion, - the act being directed to the fallopian tube and not to the foetus⁴⁶.

Curran criticizes the "physicalism" of the Catholic tradition, stating that in the field of sexual ethics, the Catholic tradition has too often identified the physical or the natural with the totality of the human being: "The human being is made up of several dimensions - for example the physical, the psychical, the social one"⁴⁷. In this context, contemporary theologians who criticize the physicalism of Catholic teaching, seriously take Pope Pius XII's statement on the prolongation of life: the physical part and the body exist to serve the higher spiritual good of the person.⁴⁸ Curran continues the idea with an induction of "proportional reason". This could fall into a special chapter on the "compromise of proportion", depending directly on "proportionalism", or the doctrine of "proportionality" (unanimously accepted measure or proportion). Proportional reason discerns whether there is somewhere sufficient reason to justify pre-moral evil [pre-moral evil being that which harms pre-moral goods: life, health, procreation]. Thus, killing an unjust aggressor is justified by the right to self-defence if someone has no other way to save their life. Similarly, one can directly abort a foetus to save the mother's life. Revisionist theologians of the Catholic tradition have used proportionalism or similar approaches [in the sense of sufficient reason principle] to argue against papal positions on contraception, masturbation, artificial insemination, homosexual acts, and

⁴⁴ Ioan Petru CULIANU, *Eros și magie în Renaștere*, p. 141.

⁴⁵ Marcellinus ZALBA, *Theologiae moralis summa*, Madrid, Biblioteca de autores cristianos, 1952-1958, vol. 2, p. 295.

⁴⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 150-151.

⁴⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 155.

⁴⁸ Papa PIUS AL XII-LEA, "The Prolongation of Life", 24 November 1957, *Medical Ethics: Sources of Catholic Teachings*, St. Louis, Catholic Health Association, 1989, p. 207.

the concept of direct and indirect effect. This means that for a proportionate reason one could justify both contraception and homosexual acts.

“One of the problems I have with proportionality is the identification of evil with what can only be a problem of limitation (human finitude). Let’s take the example of contraception. The integrity of the physical aspect of the marital act is only one aspect. Other aspects include psychological, sociological, aesthetic and economic. No human act is ever perfect in every dimension. But the inability to be perfect comes from finitude [from the limitation of the human existential condition], and not from evil”⁴⁹.

It is noteworthy that the “diplomacy” of Curran’s thinking makes him hide behind the “revisionist theologians” of the Catholic tradition: Curran only questions certain papal teachings that are inconsistent with our fallen soul, without taking an open stance against them. Probably due to this ability to sneak through ideas without taking a clear position, he managed to keep his position as a university professor during the “contract crisis”.

The School of Catholic Moral Theology bearing the views of Germain Grisez and John Finnis rejects proportionalism and defends the absolute negative norms proposed by the hierarchical magisterium (such as the prohibition of contraception, homosexual acts, artificial insemination ...), but from positions of reinterpretation or even rejection of both Aquinas’ theory of natural law and papal documents⁵⁰. Germain Grisez states that nature is not normative and that we cannot make value judgments about the “best” because the values of the good cannot be compared: moral situations have no fixed limits. After all, fundamental human moral goods are immeasurable⁵¹. The basic principle of Grisez’s moral theory is to act intentionally “only in the sense of those possibilities whose desire is compatible with the will to integral human fulfilment”⁵². “Grisez proposes eight fundamental human goods that are self-evident. They are not *a priori*,

⁴⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 156-157.

⁵⁰ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 158.

⁵¹ Germain GRISEZ and Russell SHAW, *Fulfillment in Christ: A Summary of Christian Moral Principles*, Notre Dame, University of Notre Dame Press, 1991, pp. 66-71.

⁵² Germain GRISEZ and Russell SHAW, *Fulfillment in Christ: A Summary of Christian Moral Principles*, p. 80.

nor are they deduced from any primordial principle, nor are they extracted from any metaphysical understanding of human nature”⁵³. These goods are self-evident in the sense that we know them by the very meaning of their terms⁵⁴. In Grisez’s theory there are four existential goods (self-integration; practical rationality or authenticity; friendship and justice; religion or holiness) and three substantial goods (life and bodily good; knowledge of truth and appreciation of beauty; and ability to perform and play). The eighth good is the complex good of marriage and family⁵⁵. Charles Curran rejects Grisez’s view of fundamental human goods as self-evident:

“I disagree with this theory and some of its applications, such as illustrating the case of contraception. Most people would approve of the fact that life is a genuine human good. But the distance between accepting life as a fundamental good and claiming that an act of contraception in marriage leads directly against it, is very great, and contraception remains far removed from the fundamental good of life itself. Could anyone who did not begin by believing that contraception and masturbation are intrinsically evil acts ever claim that a deliberate act of contraception or masturbation involves an attack on the fundamental good of life? More than theoretically, I think that an opportunity can go against a fundamental human good. The relational model recognizes the relational character of the whole reality in such a way that no one can absolutize the fundamental goods. Sometimes the goods of friendship and life come into conflict”⁵⁶.

Charles Curran goes as far as to justify contraception and masturbation, he even says the six commandments of the Decalogue concerning love of neighbour are not received by divine revelation, but are “derived from the experience of the tribe and the community”. (!!!)

“Although the Ten Commandments should not be seen as the central and guiding aspect of Christian morality, they obviously

⁵³ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p.159.

⁵⁴ John FINNIS, Germain GRISEZ și Joseph BOYLE, “Practical Principles, Moral Truth, and Ultimate Ends”, in: *American Journal of Jurisprudence* 32 (1987), p. 106.

⁵⁵ Germain GRISEZ and Russell SHAW, *Fulfillment in Christ...*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 159-160.

played a very significant role in human and Christian moral life. Did God give these commandments in a special revelation? I tend to agree with Bible exegetes who see the second table of the Decalogue rising from tribe and community experience⁵⁷.

The so-called “biblical” exegetes who openly assert their unbelief and stand against God’s Revelation form a whole school of “thinking”⁵⁸. Charles Curran bases his claims on the “thinking” of biblical exegetes so degenerate that they no longer believe in Revelation! What else can you expect from such a man? He can take any freedom (moral or immoral) since he states that human experience can only “agree” with the fundamental human goods required by the commandments of the Decalogue. So, Curran believes that the commandments do not bind, but, since they are “derived from the tribe’s experience”, they are not absolute imperatives (not even in the order of their divine origin – also contested!), but optional norms, even if they are “minimum requirements”: “Thus, the second table of the Ten Commandments comes from the tribe’s experience; it encodes what is minimally necessary. Human experience can agree with these fundamental human goods”⁵⁹. [Or it may not be!]

The conclusion of this chapter is there are absolute rules.

“However, they cannot be based on the physical structure or the object of the act. Therefore, the more one is involved in specific circumstances, the greater is the possibility of exceptions. Law cannot be the primary model of moral theology, but a relational-responsibility model can and should recognize the existence of several absolute norms. However, such norms are not the primary reality in moral theology, nor do they cover much of the map of morality”⁶⁰.

⁵⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 162.

⁵⁸ Johann Jakob STAMM and Maurice Edward ANDREW, *The Ten Commandments in Recent Research*, Studies in Biblical Theology, Second series, nr. 5, Naperville, Ill, Alec R. Alleson, 1968, pp. 66-75; See A.D.H. MAYES, “The Decalogue of Moses: An Enduring Ethical Programme?”, in: *Ethics and the Christian*, Ed. Sean Freyne, Dublin, Columba, 1991, pp. 25- 40.

⁵⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 163.

⁶⁰ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 166.

Curran's rejection of the deontological model (the model of the Law) is not supported by the "inconsistencies" of Thomas Aquinas's theory. It has deeper roots, based on the **rejection of the revealed character** of the Law and ultimately on its own unbelief! This symptom is peculiar to those who imagine that theological works come from one another and that, in the absence of liturgical life and mystical contemplation, the authors of books quote each other. The disease of this unbelief manifested itself in the case of New Testament exegetes in the form of the "original gospel" postulate. In the case of moral theology there is little left and we will say that "everything is allowed" insofar as our acts will be in accordance with the "experience of the tribe and the community"!

f. Moral Consciousness

Consciousness is generally defined as a judgment about the morality of an act that will be done or omitted, or that has already been done or omitted by a person⁶¹. Curran adopts the two aspects of consciousness contained in theological textbooks: an aspect that reveals the true or erroneous conscience, - depending on the conformity of the judgment of the conscience with the objective reality- and an aspect that reveals the conscience as sincere or insincere, - depending on the person's attitude towards another. Curran then analyses the four logical possibilities of these aspects' combinations: 1. True and sincere conscience, 2. True and insincere conscience, 3. Wrong and sincere conscience, and 4. Wrong and insincere conscience⁶². In these conditions, the fundamental dilemma would be: I have to follow my conscience, but my conscience could be wrong⁶³. [No reference to the presence of God within consciousness!] The term "moral conscience" is literal: "syneidesis" and was introduced into Holy Scripture by the Apostle Paul. Consciousness would be the faculty of remorse - resentments or rebukes of conscience, and inner unrest following an action against good are generated in this faculty. This is called consecutive or negative consciousness, which occurs as a rebuke following the act committed. Protestant theologians like C. A. Pierce admit the Apostle of the Gentiles mentions only this consecutive consciousness, arguing that the aspect of consciousness prior to the act, and the aspect of legislative

⁶¹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 172.

⁶² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 173.

⁶³ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 174.

consciousness, which serves as a guide of conduct, would not exist at all in Pauline thinking⁶⁴. Blessed Jerome gave us the notion “synderesis”, which would refer to the feeling of one’s own sinfulness, - to the learning of the practical reason by which one knows the first principles of the natural law, as well as the fact that one does not observe them⁶⁵. If consciousness is seen to function on the basis of syllogism, Curran does not exclude either the spiritual ways of decision-making: discernment of spirits and prophetic inspiration, under the three aspects or phenomena: revelations or visions, internal enlightenment, or general stages of consolation⁶⁶. These are charisms accompanied by divine confirmations, such as humility, trust in God, patience, true freedom, charity, inner peace.

Curran proposes a holistic understanding of consciousness: “The model of relationality-responsibility sees this call to holiness in the light of the multiple relationships we live in - with God, with our loved ones, with ourselves and with the world”⁶⁷. In the circumstances of the moral life, Curran argues for the need to choose a viable alternative, which can only be achieved if you have a creative moral imagination. The role of the creative moral imagination was described by the theologian Daniel C. Maguire: the moral creative imagination sees and discerns possibilities in the present to bring about changes and to make possible what has not yet appeared⁶⁸.

Appealing to the Hebrew term “heart” in Holy Scripture, and arguing that the “heart” has “its reasons” Curran goes on to discover the emotional aspect of consciousness, as well as the intuitive and gracious aspect that completes its rational aspect⁶⁹.

The ecclesial community is an antidote to the sources of conscience error - but in Curran’s view not because of direct divine revelation or apostolic succession, but because “the Church community is a powerful antidote to our finitude and limitations”⁷⁰.

Regarding the teaching of the Church, Curran gives arguments to support the possibility of public disagreement of Catholic Christians with

⁶⁴ C. A. PIERCE, *Conscience in the New Testament*, London, SCM, 1955, p. 109.

⁶⁵ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 175.

⁶⁶ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 177-178.

⁶⁷ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 182.

⁶⁸ Daniel. C. MAGUIRE, *The Moral Choice*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday, 1978, pp. 128-188.

⁶⁹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 184-185.

⁷⁰ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 188.

the infallible teaching of the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church⁷¹. Curran asks questions and expresses doubts about the **permanent** assistance of the Holy Spirit within the magisterium of the Catholic Church⁷². “Can a position based on natural law and not discovered by Revelation (as is the case of artificial contraception, but not necessary of other moral teachings) be infallibly thought of?” [We would say that if the true Church can infallibly assert truths of the supernatural - such as the dogma of the Holy Trinity - all the more could she infallibly assert truths of the natural! But in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, the excesses of the papacy against the scholars of the Middle Ages, and now the opposite direction of the *aggiornamento* made without any discernment, have led to questioning its position on natural law.] Due to the specific condition of the Roman Catholic Church, theologians have come to appeal to strange concepts. Thus, natural law became “the secondary object of infallibility”⁷³. Past papal excesses, as well as today’s surrenders, have led to “deterioration of the papal magisterium credibility”⁷⁴, as Curran noticed. And we can’t say he didn’t put his shoulder to that damage.

⁷¹ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, p. 215.

⁷² Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 221-222.

⁷³ Francis A. SULLIVAN, “The ‘Secondary Object of Infallibility’”, in: *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp. 536-550.

⁷⁴ Charles E. CURRAN, *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today, A Synthesis*, pp. 227-228.