

The Possibility of How the Chinese Moral Theology Might Interpret and Understand the Universal Catholic Moral Teaching in the Chinese Context

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After studying moral theology for several years, I have come to realize that universal Catholic moral theology does not easily fit within the context of local Chinese society. This does not necessarily mean that Catholic moral teaching is wrong; nor that it should not apply to the Chinese society. The reason for my conclusion is that I recognize that universal Catholic moral teaching faces many difficulties and challenges in its application in the Chinese context.

First of all, universal Catholic moral teaching does address the most pressing issues in the local circumstances of China such as the burden of poverty; the question of how to meet the challenge of modernization, the commodification of the economy in traditional culture and village life, and so on. However, since theology is always developing, we should not expect universal Catholic moral teaching to be a moral dictionary for all possible moral cases anywhere in the world. Rather we should look at it as the basic moral guide. How to deal with local moral issues should be the task of local moral theology or contextual theology.

Second, in case of conflicts between Chinese traditional moral teaching and Catholic moral teaching, it can be difficult for Catholic moral teaching to take advantage of the Chinese traditional moral teaching, especially if it is not appreciated and welcomed. This may be the reason why Chinese Catholic faithful mentally struggle with the question of whether they have to be westerners in order to be Catholic. Specific conflicts between Chinese traditional moral teaching and Catholic moral teaching are mainly found on issues such as parental arranged marriage, the social and family role of women, relations between husband and wife, the positions of female children and male children in the family, the relation between citizens and Governments, and the like. These are examples of hard issues for the Catholic Church in China, and perhaps similar issues for local churches in any other culture. They are hard issues, not only because they are matters of culture, but matters of conscience as well. Since it is a matter of both, it will take time to allow both local culture and Church teaching to develop in such a way as to connect conscience, culture and morality in a new engagement.

Thirdly, how to be properly interpreted and understood in the Chinese context is the other challenge facing universal Catholic moral teaching. Since as Chinese Catholics we should have the characteristics of being both Catholic and Chinese, the key task of Chinese Catholic moral theology is to teach us how to lead Chinese Catholic lives faithfully, in accordance with universal Catholic moral teaching in our local Chinese context. Therefore, in this short presentation, I try to focus on this third issue by showing examples of how possibly to interpret and understand universal Catholic moral teaching within the local Chinese context.

As far as I understand it, universal Catholic moral teaching is based upon “come and follow me,” the invitation of Jesus Christ who is Love. This perfect Love of self-sacrifice can be interpreted and understood as an issue of justice. This justice finds its root in God's dignity and the sacred dignity of each individual human person who derives her dignity from God as His image and likeness. Therefore, both the issue of individual dignity and the issue of Justice are the basic elements upon which Universal moral teaching is based. For this reason, it is the most fundamentally important moral matter in the development of Chinese Catholic moral theology to have a proper interpretation and understanding about the issues of both dignity and justice in the Chinese social environment.

1. Understanding Dignity in the Chinese Context

Dignity is the starting point of Catholic moral teaching. How we treat others depends on how we look at others. Unless we look at others as ourselves may we never love others as ourselves. Therefore, the recognition of the dignity of others is the key point in terms of how people treat others as humans. The more dignity we are able to recognize in others, the more respect we may pay to others. Unless we are able to recognize the dignity of others, and who they are as human beings, we will not be able to treat others as human beings.

Regarding the understanding of human dignity, Chinese culture, like any culture, has both positive and negative aspects. Speaking from its positive aspect, the Chinese culture does recognize the dignity of persons in several distinct ways: (1). In the friendship and hospitality of the culture. Chinese culture welcomes people in a polite way. This politeness shows the fact that Chinese culture does respect and honor people. Chinese people refer to each other as close relatives, and look at outsiders as their friends. This good Chinese tradition reveals that Chinese culture is a culture of civilization of humankind. (2). In the recognition of one's position in the family and society. As a culture of civilization, the Chinese culture is concerned very much about the right relations among people. In order to ensure each person receives proper respect, the Chinese culture tries to respect each person by her position. For this reason, the Chinese culture always educates its people to refer to each person by their position. In doing so, we recognize and respect each person for who she or he is in a proper way. (3). In fidelity and responsibility. The Chinese culture takes the issues of fidelity and responsibility very seriously. Faithfulness and responsibility are not only the virtues one should have: but also the signs of respect for what one is doing and to whom one should be faithful, and for whom one should be responsible. By being faithful and responsible we not only respect those to whom we should be faithful and responsible for, but also respect ourselves as well. (4). More clearly this recognition is seen in the recognition of others as oneself. The Chinese culture speaks very clearly that one should respect the elders of others as he does his own elders; and he should love the children of others as he does his own children. We may know the past according to the present and know others according to ourselves, since past is the

same as the present, others are the same as ourselves. In the same way the golden rule is emphasized in Chinese culture as well: "Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do so to them."

From the discussions above, we can see that Chinese culture does indeed recognize the dignity of persons. This recognition of human's dignity in the Chinese culture has always enabled the Chinese people to look at others as equal to themselves and to treat others justly with respect and dignity. It is because the Chinese people cherish friendships and enjoy hospitality that Beijing welcomes peoples of the world to the Olympic Games in 2008. It is because of the love people have for the children of others that they do for the children of their own; that they support the children of the poor to go to schools. It is because they recognize the dignity and cherish the lives of the children of others, that people come to adopt abandoned children even from outside of China. It is not only because they are faithful and responsible to their professions, but also because they recognize the sacred dignity and lives of others, that medical doctors, workers, volunteers come to take care of the sick and to fight against AIDS and SARS, even at the risk of their own lives.

This recognition of the dignity of human persons in the Chinese culture shows that the Chinese world is good soil which allows the good news of love of Jesus Christ to take root. This also makes it possible for Catholic moral teaching to find its home in this world. This is obviously the good foundation that Chinese moral theology also has found to be a good foundation for itself. The main task of Chinese moral theology - to interpret and understand universal Catholic moral teaching in the Chinese context - should be based upon this good foundation.

For moral theology, the future is bright, but the way is narrow. While we are talking about the brightness, we have to take the narrowness into account. The negative aspect of the Chinese culture always threatens the recognition of the dignity of human persons. I am not sure whether it is a cultural matter or a matter of humanity's fallen nature or both, but it seems that people do not always recognize and respect others as equal human beings for who they are. It is often a great temptation for people especially for those who are powerful, the rich and the advantaged to think and strive to be higher and more valuable than others. On the other hand, for the poor, the most vulnerable and the marginalized, it seems that they accept the reality of being disadvantaged, and they themselves even agree that they are less valuable and less worthy of respect. However, the essential value and dignity of each human person is not based on what she has but on who she is. This misunderstanding of the dignity of persons tempts the advantaged to often violate the dignity of the disadvantaged by ignorance, unfair treatment, disrespect, prejudice, discrimination, violence, any kind of abuse, torture, abortion and so on. On the other hand, for the disadvantaged, it is also a great temptation to ignore and even violate their own dignity. It has even been said that there is no need to be concerned about dignity and morality for the poor. They

may do anything in their struggle for life, even if it means doing things unjustly, or doing things with no consideration for their own dignity or respect.

While we are sad about such situations with such differences in dignity and justice, we are also reminded of the urgent need for the good news of the love of Jesus Christ, of promoting the dignity of each and every individual human person. Considering the issue of dignity, both the advantages and disadvantages, Catholic moral teaching may have shown us the fact that it is absolutely possible for Catholic moral teaching to take root in Chinese culture. At the same time, it is always a challenge to put moral teaching into practice. This situation clearly tells us the basic direction where the Chinese Catholic moral theology should be going, and what is the fundamental issue on which Chinese Catholic moral theology should focus. Namely, the great task of the Chinese Catholic moral theology is to discover the good soil in Chinese culture in which to continue promoting the dignity of human persons. Meanwhile, we must be also aware of the great challenge of various violations of human dignity we may face in the Chinese society today; and we must try to awaken people's awareness of the dignity of others as well as their own and to challenge people to be just.

2. Understanding of the Issue of Justice in Chinese Context

In order to ensure and protect the dignity of the human person, the issue of justice must be taken into consideration. From the Catholic moral teaching perspective, justice should be understood in a sense of love. If the Decalogue is speaking of justice, the hard saying of the Lord is talking about love. If the hard saying includes the Decalogue, love contains justice. If the real meaning of the Decalogue is justice, the real meaning of justice is nothing else but love. There can be no justice without love. This justice should be and is based upon faith, faith in Jesus Christ who is love. All kinds of justice must be understood and practiced in love. There is no absolute justice in the world without love.

In my understanding, the Chinese culture, in terms of justice, very much fits the moral teaching of the Church. Since the Chinese culture is in favor of friendship and hospitality, it seems that in many situations the Chinese people do not often look at justice in a commutative sense, but rather in a way of friendly caring and loving. This does not necessarily mean that the Chinese people never practice justice in a commutative sense. In an extreme sense, Chinese culture also makes the claims of "life for life," and "money for money." However, normally the Chinese culture does value and look at justice in a human way rather than in a material sense. Perhaps this is the reason why I have never said "thank you" to my parents in my life. This also is perhaps the reason why, when a group of Chinese people eat together in a restaurant, we do not often see everyone take money out their pockets to pay for their food. Instead, only the person who is most eager to pay for the whole group pays. The Chinese culture believes that it is wise not to make things too clear since human life is not something like one plus one equals two, but is much more complicated. In this sense, Chinese culture has an obvious advantage in adapting the notion of justice in a sense of

love as the Catholic Church teaches. On the other hand, it should be easy for Church teaching on justice to take root in Chinese culture.

However, while we are glad to see the advantage we may have in terms of interpreting the Church's teaching on justice in Chinese culture, we should be also aware of the fact that this friendly culture may also be a possible cause of violations of justice. Lack of clarity is good for one to open oneself to love others; alternately, however, it may also create the chance for one to do things unjustly. If one only likes to eat but never pays, then what happens is imaginable – there will be no justice. Moreover, since China is still a developing country, it is still working to develop a complete set of laws. In situations like this, it is possible for people to take advantage of the law to gain benefits unjustly. Even if the laws are fully developed, there will always be possibilities for people to take advantage of the law since there can be no perfect human law. When we are talking about the law, we should always put in mind the fact that whatever the law is, it is for the people, and people are not for the law. We deal with people as human beings, not as legal beings. We should avoid making any innocent people victims of the law, which would also be a violation of justice, especially while we enjoy the law's benefit.

It is clear that Chinese culture is good soil for Church teaching on justice. The friendly Chinese culture is not really foreign to the Church's moral teaching of justice. Therefore, Chinese Catholic moral theology should take advantage of the culture to continue promoting justice, since the issue of justice is not only easy for Chinese Catholic moral theology to interpret within Chinese culture, but also significant in human morality. I believe this is also one of the main issues Chinese Catholic moral theology should focus on.

Conclusion

Moral theology is not interested in condemning anyone, in judging any culture and situation. Its purpose is to help people to live their lives as human beings with dignity in justice and love within their local social context. Chinese Catholic moral theology should find ways of discovering, restoring and promoting the value of the rich Chinese culture so that it may find the possible ways of interpreting universal Catholic moral teaching in the Chinese context. Meanwhile, Chinese Catholic moral theology should find the proper ways of dealing with the contemporary moral issues in local Chinese circumstances, under the guidance of universal Catholic moral teaching. Obviously, it is not easy to do so. There are always challenges and obstacles we may face from any aspects of the social situation. However, since God wills that all peoples share the good news of the love of Jesus Christ, we believe with confidence that Love and justice will kiss and God's promised Shalom will prevail in the Society of China as well as in all corners of the earth.