

BENIGNITY

I do not know of any use of the expression 'pastoral benignity (kindness)' referring to the moral theology of St Alphonsus before it appeared in the title of a book, *Facing Rigorism, A Morality of Pastoral Benignity* (1986). This expression was endorsed by John Paul II's Apostolic Letter *Spiritus Domini*, written on the occasion of the second centenary of Alphonsus' death (AAS 79[1987] 1365-75).

This apostolic letter is the latest document of the magisterium that has singled out, with great emphasis, the role of Alphonsus in the history of moral theology and his option for a moral theology of 'pastoral benignity'. After affirming that Alphonsus was a renovator of moral theology (*rerum moralium restitutor*) and that his moral works 'have made him a master of Catholic moral wisdom' (*magistrum sapientiae moralis catholicae*), the pope underlines the via media of Alphonsus as between with rigorism and laxism. He concludes with an exhortation, that, as Redemptorists, we should be guided in our ministries by the criterion of pastoral benignity: 'in the ministry of the confessional and in spiritual direction of souls, and especially in the pastoral life of the sanctuaries that have been entrusted to the care of your Institute, pastoral benignity should always guide you without diminishing the wholesome teachings of Christ' (*semper veluti ductrix habeatur benignitas pastoralis*).

General Meaning

In the more than 50 dictionaries that treat the diverse areas of theology (biblical, dogmatic, moral, liturgical, catechistical, etc.) that I have consulted, I have found not one entry dedicated to the theme of benignity, nor does this expression appear in the analytical indices of the said dictionaries.

According to Forcelini, the Latin word for benignity (*benignitas*) refers to the attitude of the soul to do good, while 'liberality' (*liberalitas*) refers to the external doing of good and 'affability' (*comitas*) is expressed through gentle and kind words. In the detailed classification of the virtues according to the medieval theologians, (for example, in the well-developed Aristotelian schema of Thomas Aquinas), there is no virtue known as benignity. The virtues closest to it would be magnanimity, compassion, liberality and affability.

This absence in the moral treatises about virtue contrasts with the presence of the term in the Greek Bible (LXX, NT: *chrestótes*) and in the Vulgate (*benignitas*). The Kittel Dictionary is aware of this biblical term and, despite the silence of other dictionaries, offers an entry about the word. From a gathering of the New Testament texts in which the expression is used, we can deduce benignity to be the category to express the form of relationship, in the fullness of grace that God establishes with humanity in Christ Jesus (Rom 2:4; 11:22; Tit 3:4; Eph 2:7); it also is used to formulate a specific Christian attitude in interpersonal relationships (Gal 5:22).

This theological content has not been identified with the sources of ethics (the virtue of ethics) but rather with the interpretation of ethical norms. As a matter of fact, the use of the Latin term *benignitas* is applied mostly in the area of applying norms rather than in the area of the ethical virtues. The jurists are the ones who have used benignity in the moment of interpreting laws and applying punishments.

In accordance with this last understanding of the word, benignity is more the attitude of the one who applies a normative orientation, having taken into consideration the particular conditions of the person when referring to the norm. Benignity would be like flexibility and equity as forms of interpreting and applying law according to the exigency of an evangelical spirit (*aequitas canonica*). This *sapiens aequitas*, praised by Pope Paul VI (*Allocution to the Tribunal of the Roman Rota*, 8/II/1973), was defined as 'justice moderated by kindness and mercy'.

Application to the Moral Theology of St Alphonsus

I believe that among the many characteristics of Alphonsian moral theology, the best is the one that expresses its distinctiveness as a 'middle of the road moral theology' between the excesses of laxism and the harshness of rigorism. This moral option is guided, as motive and as goal, by the desire for salvation; and is preferentially applied to the areas of conscience and sacramental practice.

There is a clear salvific orientation behind the use of the term pastoral benignity. The Christianity understood and lived by Alphonsus was always one of abundant redemption for all.

The application of benignity takes place in the double area where the Alphonsian moral theology is preferentially active: in the area of conscience and in the practice of Penance. According to a biographer of the 19th century (J. Jeancard, 1828), Alphonsus brought about a 'Copernican Revolution' in the practice of the sacrament of Penance. This revolution took place through the application of benignity in the practice of sacramental reconciliation (without forgetting the sacrament of the Eucharist: Communion).

More than in concrete examples, benignity manifests itself through the general approach of the confessor who applies this benignity in diverse situations, particularly in relation to the requisites of Penance (confession, absolution, satisfaction), and in his attitude toward occasional, habitual and recidivist penitents.

As its final goal, pastoral benignity should 'calm' the penitent's conscience without 'watering down' gospel values, by creating a false sense of tranquility or losing the necessary tension of striving for evangelical perfection.

RECOMMENDED READINGS

Häring, B.: *Sant' Alfonso: una morale per i redenti*: in L. Álvarez Verdes-S. Majorano (eds.), *Morale e Redenzione*. AA (Roma, 1983), 17-32.

Vidal, M.: *Frente al rigorismo moral benignidad pastoral. Alfonso de Liguori (1696-1787)*. Editorial PS (Madrid, 1986). Italian Translation: *La Morale di Sant' Alfonso*. AA (Roma, 1992).

ID.: *Dios misericordioso y conciencia moral. La propuesta antijansenista de San Alfonso Ma. De Liguori (1696-1787)* Editorial PS (Madrid, 2000).

Weiss, K.: *Chrestótes*: G. Kittel – G. Friedrich (eds), *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, IX (Stuttgart-Berlin-Köln-München, 1973) 472-478.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What meaning does benignity have in the New Testament? Review the texts provided in this article.
2. What do you think about the absence of benignity among the virtues in the Aristotelian schema of Moral Theology?
3. Benignity: somewhere between an ethical attitude and criterion for interpreting and applying norms. How can these two dimensions be integrated?
4. Why did St Alphonsus opt for 'pastoral benignity'? What meaning did it have in his pastoral practice and in his theological thought?
5. How do you think we should interpret the phrase 'here and now', using pastoral benignity as a guide in our ministry, according to the recommendation that Pope John Paul II made to the Redemptorists?

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