**INTERGRATING MORAL THEOLOGY ANEW INTO REDEMPTORIST FORMATION**

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INTRODUCTION

I am gladand humbled to be able to make a contribution to this initiative of the congregation in which moral theology as an integral part of our formation for a prophetic religious life as Redemptorists is being discussed among confreres from the different English speaking units of Africa-Madagascar conference.

The teaching of moral theology in Redemptoristformation program should be an integral part of the moral character formation of confreres for the mission. The reason for this proposition is not far-fetched; giving the moral challenges that now confronts us in our contemporary world. This essay is aimed at exploring formation within the religious institutes in general and within the Redemptorist congregation in particular, and the need of incorporating moral theology in this process of human and spiritual development of Redemptorists confreres at both the initial and permanent (ongoing) stages of formation. This will be based on the moral theological teachings of St. AlphonsusLiguori, patron of confessors and moral theologians. Of what benefit will the study of moral theology be to both the formators and “formandi” (candidates who are at the initial stages of formation) and the professed confreres who are in full time ministry. The presentation will go as follows:

1. WHAT IS THEOLOGY?

According to F. Muniz, O. P., Theology is the “science which interprets, explains, defends and unfolds divine revelation.” We have to read the scriptures to interpret the happenings around us. It deals with God and the things that have relationship with God, either as principle or as end. Theology has no subjective or specific parts. It has, however, different integral parts to it. It is divided according to content, into dogmatic and moral theology. Dogmatic theology guides us in the contemplation of the truth about the one triune God and his creation - It is basically orthodoxy. While moral theology points to us how to do the truth in love – it is basically orthopraxis, i.e., the right living of the community of Christian disciples.

The question then is, while is moral theology to be considered as an important field of study in the formation process? We will now take a glance of moral theology.

2. MORAL THEOLOGY AT A GLANCE

Moral theology evolved as a result of major reforms undertaken by the Council of Trent (1545-63). These reforms were aimed at creating formal instruction for priests to help guide against the abuses prevalent among clerics at that time.Several courses of study were developed which covered different areas of theology – dogma, moral, and canon law. In the course of time, each of these areas developed into independent sub-disciplines, with its own experts andtext. Moral theology was created from the courses of study and a separate body of writings for the instructionof priests as confessors emerged.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As stated above, moral theology is the science of Christian praxis i.e. the science of correct Christian “deeds” or actions we ought to perform or avoid – doing the truth of faith in love.According to St. Alphonsus, moral theology is a salvific science which depicts two important aspects of the discipline. First, it is evidently a science and must meet the demands of any theological discipline in order to be of service to the Church, however, its precise method of service is to contribute to the salvation, the wholeness of people. Secondly, **he also pointed out that moral theology becomes useless unless it is put at the service of the people.**Moral Theology according to St. Thomas Aquinas,“studies the human person as the image of God.” Moral theology points out to man the way to be a good image of God, that is, a good creature and child of God. Moral Theology points out to us the way to follow Jesus Christ, the way to be his disciples.

In order for moral theology to achieve its goal, it must draw upon every available source of understanding: Scripture, tradition, relevant human sciences (such as psychology, economics, sociology) and human reason.Moral Theology argues mainly from divine authority, that is, from the revelation of faith. As a true science, it also uses reason to argue its propositions and premises. Moral Theology builds on human ethics, it connects with revelation (faith) and culture (natural theology). It is to large extent the bridge that links both revelation and culture. Moral theology in its general form examines fundamental moral principles, values and categories such as freedom, conscience, love, responsibility, and law. While in its special form, moral theology discusses the ethics of the person – including bioethics, business and social ethics – and other specific moral themes. **It takes up, above all, the human and Christian virtues - the moral virtues, the theological virtue and the Gifts of the Holy Spirit.**

Moral theology seeks to set forth general principles to help individuals make the right decisions and deal with the details of everyday living in a way that is in accordance with the Church’s moral teachings.[[2]](#footnote-2)**The goal of moral theology is to attain eternal salvation through a life in Christ, who is the perfect model of humanity.**The task of moral theology is to guide Christians to become good human beings, that is, **free and responsible**, good Christians who are real followers of Christ.Thus, the ultimate goal of moral theology is the beatific vision of God in heaven while its immediate goal is the continuing conversion and integral liberation or holiness of the human person.

3. MORAL THEOLOGY OF ST. ALPHONSUS

The very first sentence of the preface to his four volume work titled “Moral Theology,” explains the pastoral nature of his approach to finding solutions to moral issues. Pastoral experience convinced him of the need for a more benign approach to moral theology. Two elements informed Alphonsus’ choice for benignity – the first was religious and theological and this meant adopting a reasonably more positive and less negative interpretation of God and the relationships of God and man. The second was the option for a certain kind of moral reasoning which was called at that time “benign reasoning” or flexible reasoning. His approach to doing moral theology served to give the upcoming Redemptorist students (in their initial stage of formation) and the professed confreres of his time what they needed to carry out their missionary apostolate.[[3]](#footnote-3) This still applies to the present generation of Redemptorists at all levels of formation. Basically, his approach to doing moral theology was a bridge between rigorism and laxism – better still from Rigorism to benignity. According to Garrigou Lagrange, St. Alphonsus’ moral theology was rather practical than speculative. Alphonsus was able to cleanse casuistry from the defects of probabilism and laxism.[[4]](#footnote-4) His concern for a pastoral moral theology permeated his spiritual and doctrinal works as well as his praxis for confessors, missionaries and pastors.

Thus, the study and teaching of moral theology at the initial stage of formation and for professed confreres who embrace ongoing formation, for all it is worth, will greatly help in preparing confreres for the ministry of preaching, reconciliation and pastoral guidance of people. Moral theology must focus on the integral liberation of the human person, not just on norms, in order to respond to the crisis of modernity. This was always reflected in the theology and writings of St. Alphonsus who consistently emphasized the mercy of God in his approach to doing theology.

We must note that St. Alphonsus’ approach to doing moral theology was inspired by a deep personal conviction which led him to embrace what he did and to write the way he wrote during his time. **We must also understand that moraltheology as a discipline calls us to be critically reflective of our life as Christians and to realise that it is broad in its outlook, encountering people where they are and dealing with the moral issues and problems bordering them the most.**

4. FORMATION

In our world today, we are confronted by many challenges as consecrated persons. This is as a result of the many changes that keep evolving around us on a daily basis and as such formation as become a priority. This is true not only for the present generation of Redemptoristbut also for those of us who have been living their call to the Redemptorist religious life for some time.Besides, the buoyancy of our lives as Redemptorists depends upon how we as confreres have been able to discern the signs of the times and to discover in them the invitation of Christ anew.

“Formation” etymologically, is derived from the Latin verb *Formare*, which means to “mould.” Formation should not be mistaken with words like education, instruction and learning, even though they might seem to have similar meanings and actions to the former.[[5]](#footnote-5)While education touches the entirety of the human person in his/her process of socialization, instruction is the educative act on the part of the educator who aims at transmitting a content of knowledge and learning is the act on the part of the one who is educated in response to what is being offered in the act of education

Formation as a concept is broader in scope and content in contrasts to the other three words mentioned above. It engages the formators and the ones in formation. We can associate formation with education even though in its fuller sense, it has an aspect and a dimension that is more demanding. This is due to the fact that formation is not an act that is done at some particular time of one’s life – as in the case with education and learning. Nor is it the communication of any particular content - as with teaching. According to the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, formation should be understood as a process that brings about a transformation in the person and that affects that person’s entire mode of existence.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Thus, formation can be said to be an important process of conversion and this is attested to in the Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*in which formation is presented as a “dynamic process by means of which individuals are converted to the word of God in the depths of their being and at the same time, learn how to discover the signs of God in earthly realities.”[[7]](#footnote-7) In summary, formation is a life-long process involving different stages of human development for the whole of life until death.

5. REDEMPTORIST FORMATION AND THE NEED FOR A DEEPER INTEGRATION OF ALPHONSIAN MORAL THEOLOGY INTOALL STAGES OF FORMATION

Our Constitution and statutes, no. 78, aptly describes the scope of Redemptorist formation as follows: “the aim of formation for both candidates and members is to lead them to such a degree of human and Christian maturity that, with the help of God’s grace, they will be able to dedicate themselves intelligently, willingly and wholeheartedly, to the service of the missionary Church in Redemptorist community life, in order to preach the gospel to the poor.” It becomes clear from the above that formation within the congregation is a life-long process which involves individuals at every level and stimulates their conversion, in other words, it is a radical re-orientation and a progressive formation of individual’s life at all levels (psychological, intellectual, moral, emotional, social, spiritual, etc.) and their relationship with others and with God.

What this tells us is that in Redemptorist Formation, both initial and On-going, all Redemptorists are called to follow the example of St AlphonsusLiguori, especially to enter into a more profound and intimate personal relationship with the very person of Jesus Christ. Like the members of his Church, but with our own service and love, we participate in the mission of the Church of God, announcing the Kingdom of God to everyone, especially the poor and the most abandoned, with and in the power of the Holy Spirit.

5.1 INITIAL STAGE OF FORMATION AND MORAL THEOLOGY

Initial formation is an effective way for the candidates to know the Congregation’s way of life and for the (V) province to understand the aptitude of the candidates to religious life as Redemptorist.

The Redemptorist formation process is determined by our charism and way of lifewhich is oriented towards our specific mission in the Church - to proclaim the good news and to bring plentiful redemption to the poor and abandoned.To this end, the candidates are first acquainted with the history of the congregation.At this stage of formation it would be difficult for themto have a good grasps of the abstract arguments of moral theology that goes beyond doing good and avoiding evil. They are to be equipped with the fundamentals of the disciple since moral judgements, like any others, are not made in a vacuum: they are made by people who see the world in a particular way, whose outlook and vision are conditioned by their life’s experiences and by their culture. St. Alphonsus was conscious of this, and to this end, specific formation programs were put in place during his time.

The study of moral theology at this stage of forming Redemptorist for the mission enables the formandi’to penetrate deeper into God’s plan of salvation in Christ, within which is located the mission of the congregation at the service of the Church. The candidates are thus equipped to be preachers of the word and of reconciliation. We must echo that at this stage of formation community life and apostolic activities must be so arranged that they are adiscernible encouragement to a larger life in the spirit combined with a deeper reflection on moral theology as envisioned in the time of St. Alphonsus. The proper integration of all of these factors will lead the formandi’ to a further avowal of their inclination to the Redemptorist way of life.

Moral theology as taught at this stage of Redemptorist formation must go beyond mere teaching and acquaintance with doctrine, and enable a student to establish a critical dialogue between moral theology and human culture and the real questions and problems which occupy the minds of the people among whom we exercise our missionary apostolate as Redemptorist.

The prevailing situation in most of our units, in which part of our formation is done in non-Redemptorist institutions, calls for the need to integrate theAlphonsian approach of doing moral theology into our in-house formation program. This is necessary so as to ensure that their following of Christ, the Alphonsian spirit and identity, and the particular school of thought that they follow, is not lost out on the candidates.It must be pointed out to the candidates at this stage of formation that the study of moral theology will help shape the way they view the world, serves as a tool to help them understand the mechanics of their faith and how they respond readily to moral predicaments that may confront them in their missionary enterprise, be it as pastors, preachers’ teachers, etc.

5.2 ONGOING FORMATIONAND MORAL THEOLOGY

At the mention of ongoing formation we arequickto think exclusively of courses and study programmes - which often suggest the amassingof knowledge without reallygrowing in wisdom and in the art of true living. In as much as we are not discountenancing the importance of attending academic courses, it is imperative that we don’t forget that the Holy Spirit is our principal ‘Formator’ par excellence.Sincethe goal of formation is aimed atthe completetransformation of the individual it continues for a lifetime.

To underscore the importance the congregation attaches to the study of moral theology at all levels of formation (initial and ongoing) the Alphonsian Academy was founded on the 9th of February 1949 by the then superior general Most Rev. Fr. Leonard Buijs. This was aimed at continuing the legacy of St. Alphonsus’ moral theology which he, Alphonsus, bequeathed to the congregation through is numerous research, study and writings. His interest in pastoral moral theology was greatly influenced by his working amongst the poor people of scala and this formed and shaped his missionary spirit.

Ongoing formation in moral theology would afford confreres in ministry the opportunity to reflect upon the complex issues facing humanity today (such as euthanasia, assisted suicide abortion, contraception, and IVF as well as issues of gender and sexuality), including the complexity of human beings. These moral issues and many more need to be addressed since they are constantly in the news and also because they can be of great significance in the personal lives of those we encounter in the course of our different missionary endeavours. Our task as Redemptorists, who are schooled in the moral theology of our founder, St. Alphonsus, is to explain Church teaching and also to show how a personal relationship with Jesus Christ is life-giving within everyday life. We can propound sound arguments on moral issues of our time if only we open up ourselves to be lifetime students of moral theology.

Throughout our life as Redemptorist we will have the opportunity to continue developing our skills and updating our knowledge. This may be in areas such as theology, pastoral care, scripture and counselling. As stated earlier, the journey for us as Redemptoristis a life-long process. Along the way it is important to find the peace that energises us, and the learning that empowers us. With these, our life and gifts are strengthened in the service of people and the Gospel.

5.3 FORMATORS AND MORAL THEOLOGY

In a recent address to the world’s religious formators that took place at the Vatican on April 11, 2015, Pope Francis exhorted them to be witnesses to “the beauty of consecration.” He said that “If there is no witness, if there is no coherence, there will be no vocations.” He went on to say that formators are not just teachers, “you are above all witnesses of the following of Christ in your own charism.” This in my view is a profound statement from the pontiff.

Formators hold greater moral responsibility and unique leadership role of accountability and responsibility. They are also been formed as they undertake the task of forming others, albeit indirectly. In this regard they should be men of high moral rectitude and should also keep abreast of the dynamic nature of moral theology. A good knowledge of moral theology on their part will go a long way to help the formators to integrate Christian moral values in the day-to-day life of the students and their communities. Formators should know that the most important task of moral theology in the present time is not to present an organic set of moral norms but above all to deepen the mystery of the synergy between divine and human action. Evidentlysuch norms are important and necessary to human life; they are a help to us to verify our relationship to Christ. But they are not the main issue of moral theology.

Formators are themselves brothers, journeying towards an ideal that can never be fully attained. They know from experience the joys and the pains of the journey to which God has called them, and to which he is now calling others. This enables them to understand the candidates who are entrusted to them. In this regard formators are saddled with the task of discerning along with the candidates, and are required to make their judgments on each of the candidates at different stages of formation. The discernment and decision making process are extremely difficult duties to be undertaken by formators because they are conscience based, which of cause is a moral issue. So, a good understanding of the fundamentals of moral theology will go a long way in helping all those who are concerned, either directly or indirectly, in the formation process to respect the decisions that are made in good conscience by formators.

Since formation is a classic example of a practical situation in which concrete decisions are to be made, the formator’s conscience should not be dispensed with or sidestepped by those who are meant to collaborate with him in the formation process of the candidates- (V) P, his consultors, etc.– its place should not be taken by the opinion of others or the authority of another person. The judgment of conscience therefore, is the final norm for individual moral decisions, since our consciences are formed primarily by our daily life experiences that shape our ethical sensibilities and ethical discernment.In this regard, formators should be able toassist candidates to the Redemptoristreligious life in the formation of their own consciences by helping them reflect on the experiences theyare going through and sharing them with the community and their formators.

It is imperative to state therefore that; (1) formators should see formation as service which is anchored on the image of God; (2) that the goal of moral theology is for both the formators and formandito attain eternal salvation through Christ.

CONCLUSION

Following in the footsteps of our founder, St. Alpnonsus Liguori we must keep in mind that our Christian moral life is not primarily a matter of principles, regulations, or laws for resolvingmoral dilemmas but rather of keeping our eyes on Jesus that we may exhibit in our own life his virtues and allow what he revealed about God and human life to inform our moraljudgement, for, in the words of the Vatican Council, he is ‘the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of history.’[[8]](#footnote-8)In the light of this, we can summarize by saying that the main tasks of exposing confreres to moral theology at the different stages of formation is the development of individual conscience and creation of a community of moral discourse among individuals who are loyal to Christ through the Church. This will require addressing specific moral problems that some individuals are grappling with in our present time.

1. Cf., John Mahoney, *The making of Moral Theology: A Study of Roman Catholic Tradition*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987, p. 29 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Cf Vat II. *DigitatisHumanae*, DH, 14 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. “The Role of the Pastoral Moral Theologian,” in Julie Clague et al (eds.), *Moral Theology for the 21st Century: Essays in Celebartion of Kevin T. Kelly*, New York: T & T Clark, 2011, p. 273. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See,Garrigou Lagrange, R., O.P., *Beatitude*,., London, 1956, p. 13 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See, C. Nanni, “Formazione,”in J. M. Prellezo, C. Nanni, and G. Malizia (eds), *DizionariodelleScienzedell’Educazione*, Leumann,Turin: Elle Di Ci, 1977, p. 432. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, *The Religious and Human Promotion*, 12 August 1980, Boston: St. Paul Editions, 1980, n. 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, no. 68 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *GaudiumetSpes* (The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)