REDEMPTORIST FORMATION AND

MORAL THEOLOGY[[1]](#footnote-1)

The primary objective of this essay is to explore why moral theology should be an important element in the initial and ongoing formation of every Redemptorist. We will begin with a discussion of what precisely is meant by “Redemptorist formation” and by “moral theology”. We will consider how different understandings of moral theology will lead to different ways of understanding its relevance for formation. We will then examine the main reasons why moral theology should be included in the initial formation process and should be a part of ongoing formation. In particular, we will study concrete ways in which this can happen in the lives of candidates, professed members and formators.

**What is Redemptorist formation?**

Words ending in “-ation” (e.g. crystallization, industrialization, modernization, globalization, liberalization, secularization) are usually used to refer to processes rather than to material objects. They refer to processes in which an element is transformed through contact with one or more other elements. In chemistry, for instance, such processes are often deliberately provoked by substances, so called catalysts, which help bring about the desired effects. When we talk of “form-***ation***”, then, we are thinking of a process in which some kind of change takes place, not in chemical substances but in human beings. It is important to note at the outset that the human person is not normally a passive element to which something is done by others. The human person is primarily a subject who does something to himself (herself) through living in relationship with others. Both initial and ongoing formation should therefore be primarily understood as self-formation. This said, two important qualifications must be mentioned. Formation does not happen in isolation but in community, and, secondly, it does not happen according to the arbitrary judgment of the candidate but under the guidance and supervision of competent authorities. What we mean by a “formation system”, therefore, is a way of organizing life among candidates which allows them to form themselves, in community with other candidates, under the guidance of formators.

What has been said so far could be said not only of other religious families but also, at least in some sense, of many other educative and formative processes, such as those undergone by teachers, doctors, lawyers etc. An important question arises at this point as to the specific nature of Redemptorist formation. The specific character of Redemptorist formation finds expression in many different ways (history, the Constitutions and Statutes, pastoral practices, interest in moral theology etc.), but none of these is more important than the actual formative interaction with members of the Institute. Redemptorists are formed primarily in and through contact with other Redemptorists, by sharing with them the life of prayer, of community and of mission.

A key idea here is that of identification. The fact that someone enters a formation system means that there has already been some rudimentary form of identification between him and the Congregation. This may well take the simple form of an awareness such as “I think I could be happy living as these people live and doing what they do”. Or it might be a much more clearly articulated aspiration to live a certain kind of life. Whatever about the beginnings, the whole process of formation can be understood as one in which someone who arrives with his own emerging identity (personal, familial, social, religious) gradually assimilates the Redemptorist identity. To make final profession is to declare before God, before the Congregation and before the world, that I intend to live my life according to a certain pattern or model of Christian life which we call being a Redemptorist. Later we will attempt to examine more closely just what this means in concrete terms.

At this point it is necessary to introduce another major qualification. If a candidate can be formed as a teacher, a doctor or a lawyer without necessarily growing in the practice of prayer, this is not the case with Redemptorists or with other Religious. In this sense the statement made above about human beings forming themselves needs another crucial qualification. In so far as Redemptorist formation is a process which involves faith in God, it must be acknowledged that ultimately the primary agent of formation is God. One of the great mysteries of Christian life in general and of religious life in particular is that the presence and activity of the Spirit of God, most of all in communal and private prayer, does not reduce but rather increases the freedom of the individual who is forming himself, or rather, is allowing himself to be formed by the Spirit of God. This fact helps us understand the importance of “spirituality”, properly understood, in formation.

If this, in synthesis, is what we mean by “Redemptorist Formation”, what precisely do we mean by “Moral Theology”? (The following explanation is taken from the author’s contribution to Sean Wales – Dennis Billy eds., Lexicon of Redemptorist Spirituality, Rome 2011). It is useful to notice at the outset that the term “moral theology” is made up of a noun and an adjective, indicating that we are dealing here with a certain type of theology. Such a literal understanding of the term does not, however, correspond to the way in which it is generally used: when people talk about moral theology they often understand a discipline which is primarily about moral problems. To understand why this is so and appreciate the difficulties it entails, we must turn in the first instance to history. (p.185)

It is an accepted historical fact that “moral theology” emerges as a distinct theological discipline after the Council of Trent (1545- 1563). This does not of course mean that theologians did not think about morality before Trent, but rather that they did so within disciplines such as canon law, theology and various forms of what we today would call “spirituality”, all of these being closely tied to Sacred Scripture. In particular, St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274), while he did not think of moral theology as a distinct discipline, did dedicate a whole section of his colossal *Summa Theologiae* explicitly to moral questions of all kinds. All of this has one very important consequence: when we do moral theology today we must take into account both the period since the birth of the new discipline and the much longer period of christian history before this. All of this said, the emergence of moral theology after the Council of Trent is a significant event, an event which helps to understand the historical and ecclesiastical context in which St. Alphonsus emerged as a moral theologian.

The new discipline had a very specific task: to train seminarians for the practice of the sacraments, especially that of penance, as prescribed by Trent. The didactical method most suited to this end was that of the study of specific, illustrative examples of sin and moral dilemma (casuistry). This approach, which had certainly some pragmatic, didactical value, was greatly exposed to the risk of reducing morality to a question of law, commandment and sin at the expense of a whole range of other considerations (creation, redemption, grace, prayer, virtue etc.) which had been present in theology and spirituality before the emergence of the new discipline. Having been introduced into a rigid form of moral theology dominated by casuistry, which at first sight suited his training as a lawyer, one of the great achievements of St. Alphonsus is to have set moral questions in a broader theological context shaped by the doctrine of the Redemption. Without attempting to recount here the complex and controversial history of the relationship between St. Alphonsus and moral theology, we may attempt to capture some key features of the influence of Alphonsus on this discipline as it is practiced today.

It is vital to remember that St. Alphonsus wrote his *Theologia Moralis* in the first place for students and priests of the Redemptorist Congregation. We must always think of Alphonsus the founder, the confessor, the preacher and the bishop as one and the same person as Alphonsus the moral theologian. This is the best way to appreciate the way in which his theology is “earthed” in pastoral realities and is intended to promote good pastoral practice. It is generally accepted that in terms of explicit, theoretical explanation and speculation, Alphonsus follows the masters of his day, in a very obvious way Busenbaum. His contribution to moral theology is therefore not to be sought in terms of theoretical innovation but rather in the way he conceived of moral theology in the service of compassionate pastoral practice. At the core of this ministry is the proclamation of the Good News of plentiful Redemption, which is of course the very purpose of the Redemptorist Congregation.

To be faithful to the inspiration of our founder, then, we must certainly be fully committed to the proclamation of the Gospel to the poor. We must accompany this, however, with something of the same passion which Alphonsus had for moral theology. Normally this will not take the form of a full-time academic commitment, but it should involve a serious effort to follow the way in which key moral themes such as justice, sexuality and marriage, bioethics etc. are treated in moral theology today. The moral theology learned in initial and ongoing formation is aimed at enhancing the work of the Redemptorist as he pursues his particular pastoral mission. Any tendency to dismiss moral theology as outdated constitutes a lack of fidelity to our founder. In this sense moral theology is a constitutive part of the mission of the Congregation.

In the centuries since St. Alphonsus and in the Redemptorist world today, there has been in general a reasonable degree of fidelity to this tradition. In Redemptorist seminaries and libraries a certain accent has often been laid on moral theology. A mile-stone in this history occurred in the mid-20th century when the then Fr. General, Buijs, decided to found the Alphonsian Academy in Rome.

Among many illustrious figures associated with the Academy, the best known is certainly Fr. Bernhard Häring who incarnated the best of the Alphonsian spirit: a profound conviction concerning the redemptive presence of Christ; a genuine openness to contemporary culture and other disciplines; prudent and compassionate pastoral practice and, last but not least, an amazing dedication to writing moral theology.

Bernhard Häring died in 1998. His spirit, and with it the spirit of St. Alphonsus, lives on in all those confreres who dedicate themselves to the pastoral care of the poor and abandoned. It takes a particular form in those who dedicate their lives as Redemptorists to teaching and writing moral theology.

Given the complexities of the globalized world and the rapidly changing configuration of Redemptorist presence, it would seem to be a vitally important time for the transmission of this tradition to younger generations and to broader cultural contexts.

**Moral Theology in Redemptorist Formation**

Having thus examined the terms “Redemptorist Formation” and “Moral Theology”, we may now take up the question as to why moral theology should be an important element in Redemptorist formation. The most obvious and immediate reason why this is so is that moral theology was so important to St. Alphonsus. If one were to take moral theology out of the life of Alphonsus, one would be left with another figure, admirable for many other reasons, but just not recognizable as St. Alphonsus. Given that Alphonsus was not born a moral theologian, how did he become one? The reasons can of course only be found in the story of why he became a Redemptorist, indeed why he created the possibility for all of us to become Redemptorists. Passionate pastoral concern for the most deprived is the reason why Alphonsus founded the Congregation. It is important not to forget, however, that he developed this passion over time and that in the earlier part of his life he studied and practiced civil and canon law as they were taught in Naples of the early 1700s. If the heart of Alphonsus was moved by active compassion at the sight of helpless, sick, poor and unhappy people, his mind had already been formed to think in a juridical way. It is only by keeping both these dimensions in mind that we can understand how he came to be a moral theologian.

We cannot repeat here the long, complicated story of the way in which Alphonsus found himself in the midst of a bitter debate among moral theologians of his time. The key point is that at a certain point, despite or maybe because of his juridical formation, Alphonsus took a position in this debate. This position is characterized by a refusal of two extreme positions, one of which was excessively strict and the other excessively permissive (for the time). A non-technical term which is often used to capture the approach of Alphonsus is that of “pastoral benignity” in the sense of a kindly, understanding, healing approach to the penitent which avoids harsh, legalistic, judgmental attitudes.

There is another reason why every Redemptorist should take moral theology seriously. It concerns what happened to St. Alphonsus after his death as regards moral theology. The fact is that he was eventually declared Doctor of the Church (1871) and Patron of Moral Theologians and Confessors (1950) (For details, see the English section of Alfonso V. Amarante - Antonio Marazzo, *Santo, Dottore e Patrono*, Naples 2009). Again, this is a long and complicated story which we need not go into here, what we must realize is that the position he took came to be very popular and formally recognized by Church authorities. This is a very important fact in the history of the Congregation and should be a source of interest and pride to every member.

If these are the main reasons why moral theology should be of particular interest to Redemptorists in formation (i.e. all Redemptorists!), we may now consider some of the practical consequences of this for initial formation, for ongoing formation and for the task of formators.

**Moral Theology in Initial Formation**

An important part of any initial Redemptorist formation process is the study of our history. It will be clear from what has been said above about moral theology that it is unrealistic to expect candidates to understand the abstract arguments involved in this discipline at the time of Alphonsus. Something similar may also be said of much moral theology in our own time. It would therefore seem most useful to introduce new members to moral theology as a key part of the missionary response of the Congregation to the pastoral needs of people. This story can be told and appreciated without presuming a knowledge of the more abstract levels of moral theology.

An interesting and important point in formation is reached when Redemptorist students themselves begin to study moral theology. This is an invaluable moment in formation. Given the complexity of the arguments as formulated at the time, it is probably more prudent to try to get the students interested in the pastoral/ moral problems as such, without immediately trying to make the link with the actual thought and works of St. Alphonsus.

The approach of Alphonsus to pastoral practice and to moral theology is a response to a deeply perceived pastoral need. This need takes on many different forms today, but it is essentially the same need of human beings for salvation, for grace and for practical guidance in the conduct of their lives. To put this same point another way, the true follower of St. Alphonsus is not the person who repeats blindly what Alphonsus said in his time, but the person who tries to do in our time what Alphonsus did then.

This brings us a key point: the relationship between pastoral practice and moral theology. Ideally, the person in formation who is studying moral theology should also be involved in pastoral ministry. One has to be realistic here as regards initial formation.

The person in formation cannot have direct, active experience of many sides of pastoral ministry for which moral theology is important, one thinks particularly of the ministry of reconciliation. Each formation system must find ways in which the student is introduced to these ministries before he can actively practice them. In the past “case studies” were used to this end, some variation of this method may well prove useful also today. On this front, collaboration between formators and teachers of moral theology is obviously useful.

If in the past there was a very close, almost functional, link between moral theology and the sacrament of reconciliation, today this link is less central: students study moral theology not only in order to hear confessions but because moral theology, as a reflection in the light of faith on certain dimensions of human experience, can nurture and enlighten many aspects of life and ministry. If moral theology is conceived of more broadly then it also embraces the human experience of the person in formation. Through his personal experience of failure and grace, of sin and liberation, of weakness and growth the person in formation gains understanding and insight into the human condition and the workings of grace. Moral theology should help him to articulate and interpret this experience by providing terminology, explanations, theory, examples etc.

This wider and deeper understanding of moral theology has important consequences for the key theme of preaching. The process by which a candidate in the course of years of formation forms himself/is formed into an effective preacher of the Word of God is a complex, fascinating and ultimately mysterious process. Of many dimensions of this process, the one which interests us here is the role of moral theology in the formation of the preacher. Even within this limited perspective various levels need to be considered.

It is useful to distinguish between general moral theological education (as taught in courses on freedom, conscience, sin etc.) and the moral evaluation of specific moral themes (divorce, in-vitro fertilization, honesty in business etc.), remembering of course that the quality of the second is intimately tied to that of the first. What are the objectives of a general theological formation as regards preaching? This question itself might cause some surprise or reaction. It is to be feared that de facto many homilies and sermons reflect only vaguely what the preacher has learned in moral theology. While it is certainly true that the task of the preacher is not to give lessons in moral theology but to preach, it is also true that he cannot preach effectively as a Redemptorist if he speaks as if moral theology did not exist. This general truth is even more clear when we come to specific moral issues, as they are sometimes taken up in mission preaching. Here the preacher has a serious responsibility to inform himself of ongoing moral theological reflection on that specific moral question.

It may be useful to add a note here on the difference between preaching morality and moralizing. To moralize is to exhort people to good behavior, or more often to condemn repeatedly bad behavior, without placing the moral question in context and without offering reasoned grounds why one way of behaving is better than another. To preach morality, on the other hand, is always first of all to locate human living in the context of the good news of salvation, of grace and of forgiveness, drawing out the consequences of these liberating truths for a particular moral issue. In this matter the tone of the preacher is just as important as the content of what he says.

**Moral Theology in Ongoing Formation**

The idea of “ongoing formation” is one which has emerged gradually in reflection on religious life in the last number of decades. In many minds it may still be understood as a sort of vague obligation to attend seminars and days of study organized in the local community or in a given Province. Such initiatives are important and it is indeed a serious responsibility on the part of confreres to participate. The problem with this view of “ongoing formation” is that it tends to be sporadic, functional (i.e. done for some concrete purpose) and information-oriented. To think and act in this way is to operate with an impoverished concept of formation. A healthier view sees formation as being about an ongoing, open, committed effort at personal and pastoral growth. While moral theology might fit neatly into the first model of ongoing formation (e.g. study days on specific moral themes) it is often neglected as a resource for ongoing formation in a broader and deeper sense.

It may be that for psychological reasons “formation” is not the best word for this process...it may evoke memories of a period which confreres are happy to have left behind. This is sad but understandable. The very best service initial formation can do to candidates is to leave them with a healthy, motivating sense of their ongoing need to develop as persons and as ministers. Whether or not this is called “ongoing formation”, it must take on different forms than those in use in initial formation.

This will of course include the more obvious and traditional forms of renewal. Those who are in active ministry as missioners, parish priests and so forth, need to revisit periodically the moral theology they studied as students five, ten or twenty years previously.

There is a real temptation to neglect ongoing formation in the light of the pressure of pastoral work. This is particularly the case when the memory of how moral theology was taught is not inspiring. The temptation is to assume that what one heard then is all that there is to be said about moral theology. It is the duty of the local provincial administration, and indeed that of the administration of the Congregation as a whole, to propose opportunities for this kind of reflection to the confreres.

One model recently used in the Congregation is that of a two-week renewal course entitled “Moral Issues in Pastoral Ministry”. The idea of this course, organized by the Alphonsian Academy, is to provide active pastors/missioners with a review of moral theological reflection on key moral issues. Of immense value here is the exchange between confreres in the presence of moral theologians who serve as “catalysts” in the discussion. For those with a certain number of years of pastoral experience, reflection, reading and informed discussion are just as important as direct input in the form of lectures.

As in the case of initial formation, however, it would be rather short-sighted to think of the contribution of moral theology as being limited to these practical pastoral matters. Life in ministry today exposes the Redemptorist to a whole range of personal, theological and moral questions which do not usually emerge during initial formation.

The large numbers of young priests leaving ministry in the first decade after ordination is a strong message here. Moral theology, understood in the broad sense in which we have been using the term, should be a resource for confreres both individually and collectively in facing the challenges of the contemporary world. There remains often an unfortunate tendency to think of the role of moral theology as having been exhausted when the final examinations in the matter have been completed. What is needed within the Congregation is a different culture of “on-going formation” in which moral theology can play a larger role.

**Moral Theology and Formators**

The role of moral theology in the work of formators is too often thought of as simply that of encouraging the candidates to develop an interest in this discipline. This is of course an important aspect of the role of the formator. If, however, we think of moral theology is broader terms, then it will emerge that this discipline should be a resource for the formator in many, often unexplored, ways.

One of the most important and responsible roles in the life of a Province or of a Congregation as a whole is that of the formator. Not unlike a parent, the person who assumes this role becomes engaged in a series of relationships which are vital for the future life of the Congregation. What is often not recognized, or only vaguely noticed, is that the process of formation is a profoundly moral matter. Moral good and moral evil are at stake in formation at a very deep level. We saw above how this is the case with the candidate. We shall now consider why it is no less the case with the formator.

Many aspects of the life and role of the formator which at first sight might seem to have little to do with moral theology upon closer reflection can be seen to be closely tied to this discipline (understood in a broad sense as reflection in the light of faith on those aspects and dimensions of human behavior which we consider good and bad). The most obvious place to begin is with the moral life of the formator, particularly in so far as this impinges on the life of the student community. The formator, like every human being, including the students, is a vulnerable person with his own particular life-story, character, reputation etc. It is therefore to be expected that in his personal life he will be prone to error, weakness, failure and sin. The students (along with other confreres!) will of course be the first to notice and comment on any such defects. At this primary, personal level moral theology can be a very liberating, creative resource for the formator.

Through experience, reflection, prayer, study and guidance, he should be able to live with his human limitations in a serene, mature and realistic manner. This is the best possible example he can give to the students, far more effective than a formator who (ostensibly, or maybe in his own eyes only) has nothing to regret or repent.

If we move from this more personal level (which is always and everywhere inevitably present and important) to the level of the role of the formator, what is the importance of moral theology? Again, in will depend on what one understands by moral theology. One of the most difficult aspects of the formator’s role is the discernment, with the help of others, of the suitability of the candidates. It is often neglected the degree to which such a discernment is also a moral decision, a decision which the formator must make in conscience. Just what “in conscience” means here might be the subject of a very long discussion. Moral theology can help all concerned (the candidate, the formator, the Provincial, the confreres) to understand just what this means. It can help them also to understand how morally reprehensible it is on the part of anyone to pass judgement on the decision of conscience of the formator. There must of course be processes by which this decision is assessed and a decision is made by the competent authorities, but this alters nothing in the respect due to the decision of the formator when conscientiously acting in his role.

The precise role of the formator in relation to the candidate will depend to some extent on the specific culture and the degree to which the formator is aware of the moral dilemmas of the candidates. There are fine lines and codes of conduct here between formators and other professional personnel (confessors, spiritual directors, counsellors, psychologists). A key question here concerns what constitutes a moral issue? Too often, on the basis of an inadequate understanding of morality on the part of both formators and candidates, moral questions are concentrated in the area of celibacy to the neglect of other key moral issues: prayer, honesty, justice, generosity, diligence. In moral theological terms there is much to be said for thinking of formation as a training, through regular practice, in virtue. This term may seem outmoded, but in so far as it means forms of behavior which promote the overall quality of a human life it is of ongoing value. The virtues concerned are not only those generally thought of as “moral” but embrace such fundamental dispositions as faith, hope and charity.

What the formator must try to communicate to the candidates is not simply the importance of moral theology for formation (for the reasons mentioned above) but the importance of moral theology (properly understood) for his own life, for life in community and for the mission. What is at stake is not the reputation of an academic discipline (often, at times perhaps understandably, denigrated) what is at stake is the quality of the moral and faith life of the student and of the community.

Moral theology is in the service of this just as much as in the service of the penitent on some future parish mission. Indeed the two realities are intimately related: the student will be of service to the future penitent in the degree to which he has lived and assimilated the profoundest truths of moral theology in personal and community life.

If all this is true then the formator should take his role, and the place of moral theology within this role, very seriously. The image which comes to mind is that of generativity. Like all human beings, formators are called to give life and to find the fullness of life in giving life to others. Parents know how true this is, but also how messy, imperfect and painful it can be in day to day reality. It is within the imperfect world of formation, just as it is within the imperfect world of the family, that life is passed on.

**Conclusion**

The above reflections are based on the conviction that “moral theology” is all too often understood by Redemptorists in excessively narrow terms. Conceived of in this reductive way, the possible contributions of this discipline to our life as a Congregation are often obscured. There is no doubt that moral theologians themselves are in part responsible for this misunderstanding and therefore they must be actively involved in rethinking the nature and contribution of the discipline. They will only be able to do so, however, if all involved, from Father General to the most recent postulant, seriously reconsider the fruitful links between formation and moral theology.

**Questions for Group work or workshop**

1. Please complete the following sentence in no more than 7 lines:

“For me, Redemptorist formation means…..”

2. How do you perceive the contribution of St. Alphonsus to Moral Theology?

3. Based on your experience, what ideas do you have to contribute to a more effective integration of Moral Theology and Ministry in both Initial and Ongoing Formation.

NOTES:

1. Article by taken from volume 3 of the series of Redemptorist Formation, 2016, pp. 143 – 159. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)