

ASIAN
HORIZONS
Vol. 6, No. 1, March 2012
Pages: 186-189

NEW SCHOLARS

THE PLACE OF CHARITY IN ETHICS AT THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

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Year: 2011

Introduction

The theme of the place of charity in ethics at the second Vatican Council is not only a research topic in theology but it's a practical purpose: how is it possible to live better charity into the church today? After a presentation of the origins of this subject and the choices into the definition of the problem, some issues for future research are outlined.

1. The Origin of the Subject

In the New Testament, Jesus' teaching about love consists of requirements and renewed use of a specific word: *agape*, love of

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charity. When Jesus says that the love of God and love of neighbor is only a single command, it indicates the importance of love. This culminates at the Easter event when Jesus says it all in his new commandment (Jn 15:12).

This *agape* is the intimate communion of the Father with the Son into the Spirit and the communion of men with the Father through the Son into the Spirit (Jn 17:21).

In contrast to the importance given to love, there are situations where it appears even more paradoxical problem: In his total obedience to God, Abraham sacrifices his only son Isaac, beloved son of his father, says the text (Genesis 22:2). Abraham does not discuss, his gesture is without hesitation, and the angel of the Lord holding his hand at the last moment. What is this love that seems to play human feelings and disregard for human life? If love is a key to reading the Bible, however, it is fundamentally paradoxical and proved so in the event of the cross, sign of suffering and death in the eyes of men, however, signs used to express the greatness of *agape*: the kenosis of Christ is in fact an act that shows love, *agape*, unconditionally and without limit, which goes to the end of the gift. Suffering and death are reversed as an offering of love of the Son to the Father, offering his life for love, total love and radical changes in the servants friends (Jn 15:14), the slaves as free men, the men sinners saved by the blood of Christ.

This paradox of love in the Bible is not isolated and is also found in the history of human societies and in the history of the Church. Charity means also a gesture of pity to the poor hungry, a social movement for political reforms to fight against deep poverty, or an affection for friends, or a theological virtue that grows to love God and neighbor and to the love of God. The difficulty to speak of *agape* takes a turn more sensitive in the Church because of the Augustinian adage "Love and do what you want" around which focused theological interpretation. It is understandable that every human act is justified and its value because of the love that led to its realization: "If you act out of love, you can only do good things." But what place is there to be objective moral standards, if they are liable to fluctuate according to the intention to love of everyone?

As part of the dispute between supporters of rigorism and laxism, the question of *agape* is also difficult. The rigorists (of which the Jansenists) believe that each act must be moved by the current love of God without running out of grave sin. The laxists, consider the opposite, for a current charitable enough to not sin, some, up to justify an act of charity every five years, which is the minimum it

comes! *Agape* is it condemned to wander from one extreme to another? Moreover, the difficulty bounces when we remember that *agape* is closely related to the themes of desire, eros and sexuality.

These reasons can they understand the discrepancy between the message of Christ and of the Church? There is a gap between the insistence of Christ to speak of love and a relative silence of the Church on this subject, until 2005 and publication of the encyclical letter *God is Love* of pope Benedict XVI; this magisterial text offers a contemporary and positive perspective of a fundamental dimension of faith, which affects both to God and men and their mutual relationship.

Next to this attraction to the question of love, Vatican II has emerged as a key event for understanding the Christian faith and trying to live in contemporary society. It was an extraordinary period of intense theological and human terms. However, the Council is often considered with an excessive praise or criticism: it was considered either as a stumbling block, the beginning of the collapse of the Church as institution or the cause of all the subsequent problems into the Church, or as a foundation stone, the starting point for a modern Church adapted to contemporary society, making *tabula rasa* of the past.

A *via media* is more than necessary address these attitudes to extreme and is based on careful study of official records of the Council and, where possible, the personal archives of the participants. How the moral renewal of the first half of the twentieth century is considered and articulated in the Council?

2. The Main Steps of the Research

It was first necessary to define the subject: because love is an inexhaustible theme. Similarly to the Second Vatican Council which, because of the mass of available literature, the researcher can lose in inextricably intertwined.

The choices are in the four legacies that influenced the theological interpretation of charity: the contribution of Greek philosophy, then the biblical, patristic and thomistic contributions that not represent all influences encountered in defining charity, but which are the most significant and resonate with the thinking of theologians of the moral renewal.

Another set of choices was made to retain the moral theologians of the twentieth century, with a large audience in the French area and most representative of the movement of the renewal of morality: Fritz

Tillmann, Gustave Thils, Yves de Montcheuil, Jacques Leclercq, Odon Lottin, Gerard Gilleman, Bernhard Häring and Philippe Delhaye.

A final set of choices has focused in how to deal with the archives of the Council: the option of following the chronology seemed the most appropriate not to lose track of the evolution of the concept of charity, according the many committee meetings and sub-committees, plenary discussions, requests for amendments, etc.

The consultation of the bishops and theological faculties of the ante-preparatory period reveals that charity should have a better place in the statement of morality. The preparatory period sees a balance of power established between the bishops and experts, some of which initiated the moral renewal, and the consulters of the Holy Office who emerging victorious from the theological confrontation.

In the aula, charity gradually emerges as a fundamental articulation to the life of every baptized called to holiness and experience the *agape*. Innovative thinking on the universal call to holiness in *Lumen Gentium* (Chapter V) includes the revival of morality in a way that is not an exact recovery of the earlier given – the Council do not talk of love as a mother and forms virtues, or even the virtue of charity in the sense of classical theology. Moreover, the Council deals with the charity in close connection with the ecclesiology of communion based on the Trinitarian communion that exists only in and through the divine *agape*. This is an original perspective to make ethics or morals without lapsing into moralism.

3. What are the Prospects for the Future?

Many topics of study emerge during the progress of doctoral research who are all theological themes to explore in the future, like for example:

Charity calls for an opening, an encounter and communion with God and neighbor. In the context of a multipolar world and a global society become a big global village, a line of research would be to analyze how the charity can contribute to the development of a universal ethic, who successfully hold together and articulate so fruitful cultural differences of each people with the foundation of Christian identity. The increasing injustice, contempt for the poor and the growing exclusion of the homeless, require a reflexion from the requirements of the charity to practice giving back to everyone the means to live in dignity.

In the church, what reception of the council was made in terms of charity? There is a challenge to discover the importance of charity in the life of every baptized person in an ethical level that articulates each ethical individual Christian life with spiritual life.