

Forming Moral Theologians For Asia: A Challenge and a Responsibility

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Translation from French by:

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Due to historical and current ties with the Foreign Missions of Paris, each year the Catholic university of Paris (Institut Catholique de Paris) welcomes a hundred of Asian priests and nuns who come here to pursue their canonical undergraduate, postgraduate or doctoral studies (STD). Among them, some specialize in moral theology. Having been responsible for their training over the past ten years, I realize every day the challenge that it represents: even if I have visited Japan, China, India, Korea and Vietnam, I have never lived in Asia. I am aware of everything that I'm lacking in order to understand the diversity of ancient cultures, which shape this vast continent. Reading, exchanges and friendships can never manage to replace extended immersion in a country. On the other hand, I cannot shirk this task, as expectations are high, especially among those students who come from young Churches, equipped with few resources for training and, sometimes suffering from hostile political conditions. Three things sustain me: the courage and dedication of these students studying theology in a foreign language and context; the sincerity of their faith and the sacrifices they accept in order to improve their missionary skills; their creativity in the field, when they are back home with their degrees. The commitment is all the more remarkable as,

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when their Churches were founded by French missionaries, students experience ambivalent feelings towards the French: on the one hand, of course, gratitude for the Gospel that these missionaries have given them, sometimes paying with their blood; and on the other hand, bitterness for the damage committed to ancestral cultures during the founding of early Christian communities in Asia.¹ It takes time for students to succeed in naming these ambivalent feelings, and to find a just way of self affirmation.

Coming to France to study theology means entering a university tradition which grew in a context of separation between State and Church. The Faculty of Theology at the Institut Catholique de Paris is the heiress of the Sorbonne of the Middle Ages: it was founded in 1889, when theologians were forced to leave State Universities following the laws of the secularization of higher education of 1875.² Traces of this period of confrontation between the Catholic Church and the State remain present. This history requires clerics and theologians to employ a certain reserve when they speak about social issues, as in the case of moral theology. They must state the Catholic position with the force of rational arguments, avoiding arguments based on authority which could be interpreted in the public sphere as a claim of religious authority.³ French theologians evolve in a Church where the missionary zeal of the 20th century is still present, as demonstrated by the vitality of the catechumenate.⁴ This ecclesial climate encourages the theologians to bear witness to the moral values forged in Christianity, showing how they can still contribute to forming moral subjects willing to serve the common good.⁵

¹ The Korean case is unusual as Christianity began there with no contact with Western missionaries, but from books from China. In the 1779, unbaptized Confucian scholars began to organize short meetings in the city of Chonjinam in the present Diocese of Suwon, to study Christian thought. A basilica dedicated to the founders of the Church of Korea is under construction in this place.

² Claude Bressolette, "La lente fondation d'une Faculté de Théologie à Paris", in *Le Centenaire de la Faculté de Théologie de l'Institut Catholique de Paris. Revue de l'Institut Catholique de Paris*, n° 36, Octobre-Décembre 1990, p. 23-51.

³ After the damage of the French Revolution (1789), the Catholic Church had become very powerful in the 19th century with the founding of religious congregations interested in education, health and charitable institutions and foreign mission.

⁴ In 2009, about 3,000 youth and adult catechumens were baptized.

⁵ Philippe Bordeyne, *Éthique du mariage: la vocation sociale de l'amour*, Paris, Desclée De Brouwer (Théologie à l'Université 12), 2010.

The French context is unique in Europe. It also differs from North America, where religious references circulate more freely in the public sphere, even when they give rise to heated debates. With the exception of the Alsace region whose history makes it closer to the situation in Germany, France maintains theology outside of State universities, which makes it difficult for theologians to enter into the public sphere. However, what was once a handicap for moral theology, forced to contend with a hostile State, has emerged as an asset on the scene of the globalized world where pluralism of values has increased. University theology, as it developed in France, corresponds to needs that are beginning to be felt in the Churches of Asia. This explains why some of their theologians are sent in great numbers for training in Paris. For example, when these Churches have a religious minority status, or when they are faced with State atheism, they look for moral theologians capable of justifying their positions and encouraging believers to take actions consistent with the Gospel in an environment that is not conducive to Christian faith. Because of the historical and cultural specificity of the French theological context, Asian students do not return home with ready-to-use solutions, but with the ability to develop a method of thinking tailored to their own context.

As with theology in general, moral theology is rooted in the life of the Church, which is itself immersed in various contexts and cultures. As members of a local Church, where the majority serve as ordained or lay ministers, my Asian students are used to interpreting the Scriptures, celebrating the sacraments and seeking to bear witness to the Gospel by the way they conduct their lives. The purpose of moral theology is not only to produce relevant concepts, standards and life projects. It must also examine the specific contribution of Christian resources to resolve the major problems of our time: overcoming loneliness and poverty, combating violence and building peace, responding to legitimate desires for justice, encouraging the blossoming of every human being and the respect of their dignity.⁶ For, if the practice of theology is rooted in the confession of faith, it is nonetheless a human commitment, an act of solidarity with humanity, which questions its meaning and destiny.⁷ The ecclesial vocation of

⁶ Paulachan Kochapilly, "Moral Challenges Today," *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, 68, 2004, p. 608-611.

⁷ Jean-Louis Souletie, "Les conditions de la responsabilité des théologiens," in Éric Gaziaux, ed., *Responsabilité et tâches du théologien*, Leuven, Peeters (*Cahiers de la Revue Théologique de Louvain* n° 38), 2009, p. 51-70.

the theologian encourages him or her to espouse the basic attitude of the Church in today's world, as was stated in *Gaudium et Spes*, referring to the figure of Christ the Servant.⁸ The task of forming moral theologians is not only to give them skills to speak with moral correctness. It also aims to develop their capability to self-commitment, in a spirit of service and reconciliation. This implies that the moralists-to-be may reclaim their own moral experiences to continue their journey of conversion, following Christ with lucidity.

1. An appeal to interiority and to adequate discernment in the present time

To clarify what is intended here, let us refer to the moral teachings of *Gaudium et Spes* throughout the passage that precedes the section on conscience (GS 16). As shown by the historian of councils John O'Malley, the interpretation of Vatican II must take into account its original rhetoric.⁹ However, the express will of the Council Fathers was that with the Pastoral Constitution, the Catholic Church can speak to all men of contemporary ethical issues in close connection with their anthropological bearing. Moral pedagogy was thus at the heart of their project. It is my opinion that this teaching continues to provide relevant guidance in the current context, particularly through its emphasis on three aspects of modernity: the subjective uncertainty about the meaning of human activity in the universe; the perception of the ambivalence of freedom and its vulnerability to evil; the attractiveness of the social potential contained in human intelligence and of the wisdom present in cultures. In *Gaudium et Spes*, the appeal to conscience takes note of these three characteristics to delineate a possible overflow of ambivalence. The text reveals that interiority is aiming at flourishing in social commitment. In introducing readers into identifying in themselves this inner dynamic, *Gaudium et Spes* intends on the one hand to lead them to escape the temptation of despair and on the other hand to have them recognize it as gracious salvation at work in the history of mankind as in any personal history.

One reduces the meaning of the preliminary opening of *Gaudium et Spes*, when interpreting it as a simple statement of "facts", as a "see", that would correspond to the first step of the method See-Judge-Act, forged by the specialized Catholic Action in the 1930's and 1950's,

⁸ GS 3,1 ; 4, 5 ; 9,4.

⁹ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, Cambridge, MA/London, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008, p. 11-12.

especially in Belgium and France.¹⁰ In fact, GS 4-10 outlines more of a theological hermeneutic of the contemporary approach to ethical responsibility, in light of the greatness and weakness of man, themes developed at length in GS 10. This hermeneutic is underpinned by the Christian hope that the conflicts inherent in the exercise of responsibility in an increasingly complex world are polarized by the universal redemption of human history through Jesus Christ. In this sense, neither the paradoxes encountered in the exercise of responsibility,¹¹ nor the desires to make the world more just and more humane, are blind alleys. On the contrary, they are laboratories of action, within which, with the grace of God, can be forged the ability to live an ethics that is consistent with the “integral vocation of man” (GS 11). This statement does not claim that the Church is in possession of universally applicable solutions,¹² but that faith authentically enlightens ethical research, so that faith “directs the mind towards fully human solutions.” That is, despite denials by the doomsayers denounced by Pope John XXIII at the beginning of the council, the stubborn view of a hope grounded in the Incarnation and in the Paschal Mystery (GS 22).¹³

In the early 1960s, the Pastoral Constitution undoubtedly lacked a perception of the diversity of world cultures and of the plurality of ways that lead to moral life, a view that we have gained today. But, by this omission, *Gaudium et Spes* paradoxically anticipates the phenomenon of uniformity produced by globalization, particularly obvious in the promotion of the individual subject, summoned to succeed and driven to give a qualified decision on everything. In insisting upon initiating moral conscience to go beyond itself in a

¹⁰ Peter Hünemann & Bernd Jochen Hilbertah, *Herders Theologischer Kommentar Zum Zweiten Vatikanischen Konzil*, Band 4, Freiburg, Herder, 2005, p. 638 s. et 644 s., cited by Christoph Theobald, *La réception du concile Vatican II. Tome I : Accéder à la source*, Paris, Cerf, 2009, p. 774.

¹¹ They are enumerated in GS 56, echoing the opening statement.

¹² In this sense, it is excessive to say that *Gaudium et Spes* is representative of “the approach of integral Catholicism”. Cf. Christoph Theobald, “La différence chrétienne. À propos du geste théologique de Vatican II,” *Études*, n° 4121, janvier 2010, p. 65-76.

¹³ Regarding hope in uncertain times, I mention the influence of the writer Charles Péguy, a French Socialist converted to Catholicism, on the drafting of the *Gaudium et Spes*, led by Peter Haubtmann with the help of Charles Moeller. Cf. Charles Péguy, *Le Porche du mystère de la deuxième vertu*, Paris, Gallimard, 1929 ; Charles Moeller, *Littérature du XXe siècle et christianisme. Volume 4 : L'Espérance en Dieu Notre Père : Anne Frank, Miguel de Unamuno, Gabriel Marcel, Charles Du Bos, Fritz Hoch Walder, Charles Péguy*, Tournai et Paris, Casterman, 1961.

way that necessitates inner work, the counciliar text honours the subjective questioning of modernity, but simultaneously re-qualifies it. This shift is principally due to the highlighting of the enigma of the human condition, deeply attracted towards social existence. But this social orientation of the self is much feared at the same time, under the pressure of Western individualism. Therefore, Christian communities are challenged to become a factor of social transformation, echoing the appeal of the Gospel to form a harmonious body, mindful of the most vulnerable members (1 Cor 12). If the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* remains relevant, it must be put to the test of diverse cultures. These are the profound issues involved in the training of future moral theologians.

2. Learning to conceive a formation in moral theology

The cultural diversity of my students can help them to become aware of the genuine vocation of moral theologians. Starting from the Christian particularity, which is itself immersed in culturally diverse particularities, moral theologians should contribute, in the public sphere, to the search for the universal morality. Recently, this approach has found a place in the theoretical work of the International Theological Commission.¹⁴ Virtually every student of my seminar presents a continuing education project in moral theology for those engaged in the pastoral life of their local Church. The project is fictional, but it must remain credible in order to play its role as a laboratory of action and ethical responsibility.¹⁵ Each student presents a request or a need, in his or her ecclesial context, for a formation in moral theology. The public concerned, the spatial and temporal framework, the objectives, the pedagogical implementation must be clearly defined. This seminar takes place during the second year of undergraduate studies when students have already acquired a good understanding of a large *corpus* of moral theology. They are asked to justify their choices in terms of theological and moral content, but also in reference to the public concerned. The other students must assess the proposal on the joint criteria of doctrine and pedagogy.

¹⁴ International Theological Commission, *The Search for Universal Ethics: A New Look at Natural Law*, 2009. Published in French : *À la recherche d'une éthique universelle: nouveau regard sur la loi naturelle*, Paris, Cerf, 2009,

¹⁵ Paul Ricœur, "L'imagination dans le discours et dans l'action," in *Du texte à l'action*, Paris, Seuil, 1986, p. 213-236. When I was chaplain in a high school, I implemented this pedagogy to promote adolescent discovery of the Church and the action in the Church: Philippe Bordeyne, *Jeu d'Église. Enjeux et pratique d'une pédagogie*, Paris, Le Centurion, 1993.

Experience shows that discoveries occur at both levels. On the one hand, the use of a concrete theme enables them to identify gaps in their theological culture, points to deepen, authors and topics to revise. On the other hand, pedagogical miscalculations often reveal flaws in ethical and theological judgments. The active participation of the group in the critical assessment is fruitful. The students often perceive each other's deficiencies more clearly and this promotes mutual learning.

The challenge of multiculturalism is the core of this group work. One year when the number of students was particularly low, we were: a Chinese priest, a Lebanese, a Beninese and myself, the only French person. Experiencing the difficulty of entering into the other's world, of understanding his questions and moral concerns, revives in each participant an awareness of his own obscureness, even his own inconsistencies. Reciprocally, the discovery of the ethical and theological complexity of a question when asked in another country gives everyone new perspectives. Learning the work of a moralist necessitates learning to listen in a disinterested way to problems that are unfamiliar to the listener but essential for the other. The first service is to be a faithful memory: we remind the others of their past ideas in order to help them to be more discerning. Meeting the other is an asceticism. At the same time, it requires cultivating an aptitude for empathy, without which there is no humanizing moral theology, and the ability to distance oneself, without which critical thinking is impossible.¹⁶

It is not enough to record the plurality of viewpoints. The seminar teaches how to identify the practical problems that lie behind the textbook cases, in order to mobilize the most relevant ethical categories for moral discernment. For example, the Chinese student, above mentioned, wanted to prepare a presentation on the Sabbath rest for Catholic entrepreneurs, given that this right is often violated in his country. Basing his observations on the Sabbath Rest, as mentioned in the Decalogue, he had given two theological reasons for justifying it, that of creation (Exodus 20, 11) and of Egypt's Liberation (Deut. 5, 15). Then, he used an anthropological argument about the benefits of rest for the body and the soul, as well as for family life and the community, in line with the teaching of Pope Leo XIII in his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. In so doing, the student completely ignored the

¹⁶Paul Ricœur, "La fonction herméneutique de la distanciation," in *Du texte à l'action*, op. cit., p. 101-117.

specific context of China, where low wages encourage employees to seek Sunday employment, sometimes to satisfy the basic needs of their homes, sometimes to be able to afford the most desired consumer products of the market economy. Taking into account this contextual data, it became possible to focus not solely on the transgression of a biblical obligation, in fact an argument that is irrelevant to the vast majority of Chinese people. It was necessary to invent a relevant argument, based on natural law, nourished by the Christian faith, and at the same time accessible to atheists and to believers from other religions. Additional ethical issues could be raised here: the promotion of social legislation; the contribution of businesses to social progress; their role in educating employees about moderate consumerism; the virtue of temperance in the regulation of the desire to possess; the role of the Christian communities in training concerning the ethical stakes of the Sabbath rest. So, the scriptural references were no longer just the Ten Commandments, but also the wisdom teachings given by Jesus, for example on the futility of building many barns, forgetting that life is short (Lk 12, 16-21). Simultaneously, working on the Chinese context opened up new opportunities for the Lebanese and Benin students to analyze their respective contexts.

Learning to identify concrete moral problems also prepares oneself to mobilize the Christian resources that could provide a new ethical impetus for transforming ways of acting. Another year, a Vietnamese student had presented a training programme for catechists in which he wanted to address the problem of lying, with reference to a kind of moral transgression that is widespread in his country at all levels of social life, familial or ecclesiastical. For him also, the first reflex was to use the Ten Commandments, which prohibit false witness and, by extension, any breach of truth in the use of the spoken word. The student had extended his reflection to the anthropological field, by arguing that lies destroy the trust on which social life is based. The group progressed in its ethical analysis when they dealt with the question of the historical and social causes of this tendency to distort the truth, even in important and serious areas. The student was able to evoke a wound still raw in the memory of the Vietnamese people: on two occasions, in 1975 and in 1978, the government had put new money into circulation and distributed an equivalent sum of money to each family, depending on the number of family members. Overnight, the population was deprived of savings made in secret to ensure the future. This breach of trust in the currency and in those in power, had deeply undermined the relationship with others. Faced with such a wound, it was not enough to recall the norm in a

moralizing way. First, it was necessary to take into account the collective suffering and mobilize the resource of Christian hope. A participant suggested adding a comment on the biblical vision of the Dry Bones (Ezekiel 37: 1-14). By the announcement of the gift of the Spirit for a new life, he had wanted to restore confidence in a possible outcome, designated by the prophet as an exit from the tombs. This discussion enabled the participants to understand that moral education is also mobilizing the Christian faith in its capacity to restore, especially in situations of social decay, that hope which makes a moral life possible.

3. Preparing a course on fundamental moral theology

After this exercise, based on preparing oneself to theological service in local Churches, the work of the seminar continues with the development of a plan for a course on fundamental moral theology to be used for training priests in a major seminary. Again, the specific context of each Church needs to be taken into consideration. By referring to the *ratio studiorum* in force in each country, the future teachers of moral theology need to identify those priorities that will enable them to define pedagogical positions. This work leads them to reclaim the training they received in their country, forcing themselves to be realistic about its strengths and its weaknesses. The great fundamental moral theology manuals serve as reservoirs, but this does not discount the need to revisit primary sources: the Scriptures, the Fathers of the Church, the magisterial teaching. As in the preparation of meetings, developing a plan for a course requires the students to face the truth about their knowledge of the history of moral theology, about its concepts, and about the fields that need to be covered in order to train seminarians towards responsible freedom.¹⁷ This is the basic work for students from any geographical origin.

Concerning the training of Asian students, this is the step where they gain a lot from familiarising themselves with the research carried out by theologians from their continent. It allows them to identify promising shifts in dealing with moral theology, in order to promote reflection and actions more suited to Asian contexts. In theological ethics however monographic studies remain relatively rare.¹⁸ In fact,

¹⁷ James F. Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century : From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences*, New York, Continuum, 2010. On moral theology in Asia, cf. p. 208-211.

¹⁸ George V. Lobo, *Christian Living According to Vatican II*, Bangalore, Theological Publications in India, 1982, reprint 1999.

the field of ethics is rather addressed through “liberating inculturation” which combines the “theology of religions” and the “theology of the people.”¹⁹ Without being exhaustive, I will give two examples that seem promising to me in order to stimulate basic research in theological ethics in the years to come.

In Asia, some research renews the approach of fundamental anthropology on which Catholic moral theology is based. Their originality lies in their specific approach to some documents of the Christian tradition that Western moral theologians had treated differently. For this reason, I often ask my students to read the masterful commentary of *Gaudium et Spes* by George Karakunnel.²⁰ It is one of the few commentaries to highlight, in the opening statement of the Pastoral Constitution, the dynamics of the Council’s call to universal brotherhood, which is not based on reason alone but also on the emotional and concrete experience of solidarity with people of any culture, any religion or school of thought. This book encourages the students to undertake new interpretations of the Council’s teachings. These confirm the analysis of Karl Rahner, who saw in Vatican II the first council of a world Church.²¹ Even if the bishops and the experts from Asia were still very few in Vatican II, the emergence of an Asian reception of this Council continues to bring about global potentials. Thus, a doctoral student of mine, an Indonesian priest, was able to uncover the role of the human search for harmony in the Council’s approach to culture in GS 56.²²

Young Asian theologians revisiting major Western theological *corpus*, demonstrate their ability to generate new interpretations. Thus, the Korean Philipp Chan Ho Park, renews the theological and philosophical approach to the concept of person by Romano Guardini. He shows us everything that the concept owes to Guardini’s interest, in a spirit of dialogue and confrontation, in the Buddhist

¹⁹ Bishop Gali Bali, “Rev. Fr Soosai Arokiasamy, s.j.: Man of the Church,” *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflections*, 66, 2002, p. 567-573. Cf. Soosai Arokiasamy & Felix M. Podimattam, eds, *Social Sin: Its Challenges to Christian Life*, Bangalore, Claretian Publications, 1991.

²⁰ George Karakunnel, *The Christian Vision of Man. A Study of the Theological Anthropology in “Gaudium et Spes” of Vatican II*, Bangalore, Asian Trading Corp., 1984.

²¹ Karl Rahner, “Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II,” *Theological Studies*, 40, 1979, p. 716-727.

²² Inosensius Sutam, “La culture et la quête humaine de l’harmonie. Étude sur l’anthropologie théologique de *Gaudium et Spes*,” Doctoral thesis registered at the theological Faculty, Institut Catholique de Paris, 2008.

tradition. It appears from this study that the concept of person that Guardini developed integrates the renouncing of the self, which is the pillar of the Buddhist approach.²³ He first gives to it an ontological meaning: the human being is given to himself in a state of beginning, in a way that he would not know how to stick to this beginning without disowning himself. But Guardini puts renouncing the self in paradoxical tension with an unconditional acceptance of self, unknown to Buddhism. According to Guardini, Buddhism ignores the second sense of the dialectic between becoming and being, between dynamism and static, between movement and rest. Morally, Buddhism is reluctant to affirm the unconditional dignity of man, Buddha himself is not regarded as a model of humanity: he only acts as a guide in the quest for becoming. On the contrary, Christianity recognizes Jesus as the perfect and harmonious conjunction of immanence and transcendence, of the completed and the uncompleted. Following Jesus is to school oneself in this harmony in order to reap the spiritual and moral fruits, and this is what differentiates the figure of Jesus from Buddha. We can see the merit of Philipp Park's research in helping Christians to place the fundamental perspective of the Christian ethic in dialogue and debate with the Buddhist concepts present in many Asian countries. It is clear that this research is only a beginning, especially as Guardini's knowledge of Buddhism was irregular, probably less refined than that of Henri de Lubac.²⁴

Some relevant studies in special moral theology can certainly encourage students to report serious ethical problems.²⁵ But I have preferred here, in accordance with the requirements of a canonically recognised degree training in moral theology, to focus on the mutual relations between the Christian faith and ways of conducting a reflection about fundamental ethics, a question which preoccupies

²³ Philipp Chan Ho Park, *"Wer sein Selbst verliert, wird es gewinnen"*. *Zum Person-Begriff Romano Guardinis und dessen Auseinandersetzung mit der Person des Buddha*, doctoral dissertation in theology (STD), University of Freiburg-im-Breisgau, 2009.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 310. On the thought of Henri de Lubac and on its relevance to the challenges of evangelization in Korea, see Germain Kwack, *La foi comme vie communiquée: le rapport entre la fides qua et la fides quae chez Henri de Lubac*, doctoral dissertation in theology (STD), Institut Catholique de Paris, 2005.

²⁵ Keun-joo Christine Pae, "Western Princesses — A Missing Story: A Christian Feminist Ethical Analysis of U.S. Military Prostitution in South Korea," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 29/2, 2009, p. 121-139.

moral theologians today.²⁶ I have shown that the teaching of *Gaudium et Spes* remains relevant if it is reinvested in light of the ethical problems of the 21st century. We can refer to this great conciliar text, to dare a training course for Asian moral theologians. In the dynamics of *Gaudium et spes*, we can target deep inculturation without ever forgetting to witness to the good news of the Gospel in the power of the Holy Spirit.

²⁶ Livio Melina & Stephan Kampowski, dir., *Come insegnare teologia morale ? Prospettive di rinnovamento nelle recenti proposte di esposizione sistematica*, Siena, Edizioni Cantagalli, 2009.