

## **GENDER JUSTICE AS AN IMPETUS TO RENEWAL OF MORAL THEOLOGY**

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### **Abstract**

In recent years, there has been a steep rise in the incidences of violence, atrocities and discrimination against women in India giving rise to heated debates on the issues of justice and equality in socio-cultural and religious ambit. The horrific stories of treating women as mere sex objects in some countries marred by war, conflicts and terrorism are raising still more serious questions regarding justice and human dignity. Contrary to some apprehensions regarding gender agenda as being focused on the destruction of sexes or of their duality or that of the two-parent family structure of mother and father, the debate on gender justice underlines the necessity of promoting equality between both sexes by eliminating deep-rooted bias, injustice and discrimination against women. Treating both men and women as created in the "image and likeness" of God (Gen 1:26) and giving equal importance to both sexes in socio-cultural and moral spheres could be an impetus to the renewal of moral theology in the light of the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

**Keywords:** Human Dignity, Gender Equality, Justice, Solidarity, Sexual Difference, Gender-based Discrimination, Violence, Gender Policy

Women have much to say to us in today's society. Sometimes we are too "machista"; we don't make room for women. Women are able to see

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things differently than men. Women can ask questions that we men just don't get.<sup>1</sup>

With these words, Pope Francis was drawing the attention of the youth in his impromptu speech on 18 January 2015 in Manila to strive towards giving equal opportunities to women in society at large. He was commenting on the small representation of women, which was evident in the disproportionate selection of boys and girls to deliver welcome speech during his meeting with the youth in Santo Thomas University, Manila. His remarks reflect the undeniable fact that although women have been glorified and exalted as goddesses in many cultures and traditions in the history of humanity, they have been discriminated and subjected to male domination, their fundamental rights and dignity have been denied and violated. India has a rich history of glorifying women as goddesses from the ancient times. The earth is venerated as the *Dharti Mata* (Mother Earth) and is a strong feminine symbol of life, sustenance and continuity of human race. Nonetheless, the dichotomy between the goddess paradigm and women's social status too existed from the time immemorial, "while the iconic and textual images of the divine females were exalted, the status of women was much inferior. A woman's only hope for emancipation was to be born as a man in her next life."<sup>2</sup> Most recently, a dramatic surge in the instances of atrocities, physical and sexual violence against women in India demonstrates the deep-rooted socio-cultural and religious bias, injustice and discrimination against them in Indian society in general.

To explicate the inevitability of gender justice being an impetus to the renewal of moral theology, it would be apt to take note of some of the recent horrifying instances of sexual violence on women in different parts of India. On 16 December 2012, a 23 year old female physiotherapy intern was beaten and gang raped in a private bus in Delhi. She died from her injuries thirteen days later while undergoing emergency treatment in Singapore. Medical reports confirmed that she had suffered serious injuries to her abdomen, intestines and genitals due to the assaults. Worst of all, a rusted iron rod was used for penetration. On 24 May 2014, two teenage girls were gang raped and hanged on a tree in Badaun district of Uttar Pradesh. Analyzing a series of sexual assault on women in India, one of the reporters made

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<sup>1</sup>Francis, *Impromptu Speech of the Holy Father to Young People in Manila* (18 January 2015), in [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150118\\_srilanka-filippine-incontro-giovani.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/january/documents/papa-francesco_20150118_srilanka-filippine-incontro-giovani.html) (25/01/2015).

<sup>2</sup>Madhu Bazaz Wangu, *Images of Indian Goddesses*, New Delhi: Abhinav Prakashan, 2003, 174.

a distressful comment in a tone of urgency, "More Badauns are waiting to happen as long as our protests are cosmetic. What is required is systemic change. And fast."<sup>3</sup> On 4 February 2015, a 28 year old mentally challenged woman was savagely raped, murdered and thrown in an open field in Rohtak, a town 80 km from Delhi. Her body was half eaten by animals and her key organs were missing. The brutality and inhumanity of the perpetrators are evident from the fact that her genitals were stuffed with sticks, stones and condoms. S.K. Dattarwal, who headed the post mortem examination, was horrified, "I have never seen such a horrific case in 30 years."<sup>4</sup> In a most recent case, a seven-year-old partially sighted girl was raped and murdered in a popular resort in Lonavala, Pune on 18 February 2015.<sup>5</sup>

These are some disturbing instances which demonstrate widespread physical and sexual violence against women in India alone. Apart from these horrendous incidents which are reported in mass media, there are innumerable incidents of brutality and assault which remain unreported or underreported because of threat, coercion or fear of losing the reputation of the victim and the family. The following intriguing questions pop up again and again, "Why some people become so savage, brutal and inhuman towards their fellow human beings? Why their conscience is not pricked while committing such atrocities? Is their conscience so ill-formed or *quasi* dead? Are they overcome by the prevailing consumerist attitude of treating women as sex objects, which can be used, abused and discarded on will as it has happened in most of the recent cases?" It is said that human beings are social animals; but often their animal instincts seem to become so uncontrollable that they become blind, deaf and dumb to some of the most basic humane values, such as love, respect, dignity and mutuality as human persons. The danger of human beings becoming the slaves of technologies has already been debated time and again. In his *Message to Women*, Paul VI had said, "Our technology runs the risk of becoming inhuman."<sup>6</sup> If these

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<sup>3</sup>Amitabh Kumar, "Badaun Rape Case; A Manifestation of Double Discrimination" in <http://thecommentator.in/2014/08/badaun-rape-case-manifestation-double-discrimination/> (05/02/2015).

<sup>4</sup>Niha Masih, "Rohtak Gang-Rape: Worst Case of Torture, Killing in 30 Years, Says Horrified Doctor" in [http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/7-men-arrested-for-nirbhaya-like-gang-rape-and-murder-80-km-from-delhi-738154?ndtv\\_alsoread](http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/7-men-arrested-for-nirbhaya-like-gang-rape-and-murder-80-km-from-delhi-738154?ndtv_alsoread) (09/02/2015).

<sup>5</sup>Manoj Kumar Lohiya, "Minor Girl Raped, Murdered in Lonavala Hotel," in <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/pune/Minor-girl-raped-murdered-in-Lonavala-hotel/articleshow/46304597.cms> (19/02/2015)

<sup>6</sup>Paul VI, "Message to Women," in James H. Kroeger, *Exploring the Treasures of Vatican II*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2011, 110.

barbaric incidences are any indicators, then human beings have indeed preceded technologies to become inhuman. United Nations General Assembly in its *Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women* has rightly recognized that,

violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination over and discrimination against women by men and to the prevention of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position compared with men.<sup>7</sup>

The UN Resolution affirms that the fundamental roots of the atrocities, discrimination and violence against women lie in men's conscious and unconscious desire to perpetuate their dominance over women without conceding any adequate space to uphold the values of justice, equality and human dignity. Therefore, the questions of gender justice and equality are at the core of any lasting change in men's attitude and behaviour. Such change could spell and script some concrete contributions to the renewal of moral theology — the way of life for the entire humanity.

### **Can Gender Justice be an Impetus to Renewal of Moral Theology?**

Women hold up half the sky, says the old Chinese adage. To which Mao added that their half weighed more.<sup>8</sup>

The Second Vatican Council was instrumental in opening the windows of the Church to let in some fresh air with bright prospects of the *aggiornamento* or always being up to date. It has given new vision and direction to the Church, life of faith, liturgy, interreligious dialogue and various social issues by promulgating Constitutions, Declarations and Decrees. Serious studies and extensive research have been undertaken to its contributions towards the renewal of moral theology. In fact, no concrete vision or direction was given by the Second Vatican Council as far as moral theology is concerned. According to James F. Keenan,

As a matter of fact, the only thing that the Council said was a practically passing remark made in the document on priestly formation. [...] Moral theology changed dramatically after the Council, not because of any direct

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<sup>7</sup>United Nations General Assembly, "48/104. Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women" in <http://www.un-documents.net/a48r104.htm> (08/02/2015).

<sup>8</sup>Jessie Bernard, *The Female World from a Global Perspective*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1987, 3.

intervention by the members of the Council, but rather because of the moral theologians who began changing during the years of the Council.<sup>9</sup>

However, the Council paved the way to indicate some of the elementary moral principles, such as, human dignity, values of justice, peace and solidarity, which played a pivotal role in contributing towards establishing a just and humane society. The Council generated new interests in moral theology by elucidating new possibilities of enriching it through inter-disciplinary studies and research. It has clearly laid strong emphasis that Christian moral life is nourished by Scripture; and therefore, Christians must strive to solve the problems faced by humanity “in the light of the Gospel” and encourage others to relentless search for truth through “loyalty to conscience” (GS, 16, 43). Still further, the concept of human person is the nucleus of the documents of the Second Vatican Council and human dignity is its major moral criterion. Therefore, an effort to search for concrete answers to the questions relating to gender justice and equality can function as an impetus to the renewal of moral theology.

Despite constituting “half of the immense human family,”<sup>10</sup> women have always suffered discrimination based on sex and gender differentiation, which has become more widespread, pervasive, serious and complex over the centuries. Ironically, theories of justice and equality are ostensibly about people, but women are hardly taken into consideration and gender differentiation plays a vital role in the perpetuation of such bias.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, gender is a *deeply entrenched institutionalization of sexual difference*<sup>12</sup> which permeates every aspect of human society. It is a powerful ideological and socio-cultural device, which “produces, reproduces, and legitimates the choices and limits that are predicated on sex category. An understanding of how gender is produced in social situations will afford clarification of the interactional scaffolding of social structure and the social control processes that sustain it.”<sup>13</sup> The term gender identity “refers to the mix of masculinity and femininity in an

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<sup>9</sup>James F. Keenan, “Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II,” in Anthony J. Cernera, ed., *Vatican II: The Continuing Agenda*, Fairfield, Connecticut: Sacred Heart University Press, 1997, 206.

<sup>10</sup>Paul VI, “Message to Women,” 109.

<sup>11</sup>Cf. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, New York: Basic Books Publishers, 1989, 8.

<sup>12</sup>Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, 6.

<sup>13</sup>Condace West – Don H. Zimmerman, “Doing Gender,” in Judith Lorber – Susan A. Farrell, ed., *The Social Construction of Gender*, Newbury Park (CA): Sage Publications, 1991, 34.

individual, implying that both masculinity and femininity are found in everyone, but in differing forms and to differing degrees. It is not the same maleness and femaleness, which connote biology; gender identity implies psychologically motivated behavior.”<sup>14</sup> It includes “psychosexual development, learning social roles, and shaping sexual preferences. Social rearing, or socialization, is a crucial element for gender identity.”<sup>15</sup> Since gender is understood in terms of social and cultural perspective,<sup>16</sup> the roles, responsibilities and specific tasks of housework and childcare assigned to women in a particular culture and society also defines the treatment received outside non-domestic sphere.

While analyzing the prospects of gender justice being an impetus to the renewal of moral theology, it needs to be underlined that gender differentiation stems from socio-cultural traditions and practices. The attributes assigned to gender categories are based upon the perceptions of what men and women do.<sup>17</sup> In most cultures, traditions and religions, men have been given more power and authority over family, defining and maintaining social order in a community or in a cluster of families, policy making and governing. The roles and contributions of both men and women in the continuity of human face seem to be equally important; however, almost all societies draw a clear line between what men and women do and how they should behave in a particular space and time. Carol P. MacCormack makes some interesting observations, “both men and women procreate, eat, defecate and satisfy other survival needs. To do so is natural, but the etiquette of eating, the time, place and position for defecation, and indeed the rules prescribing time, place and position for ejaculation or parturition are cultural.”<sup>18</sup> The observation of MacCormack makes it clear that the behavioural patterns and concepts of right and wrong are defined by each culture and society according to the need of time and situation. Since the moral precepts and ethical norms have their origin and orientation in a particular culture or society for the good of all and gender being a culturally-defined element, gender justice could be a crucial factor

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<sup>14</sup>Robert J. Stoller, *Presentations of Gender*, New Haven – London: Yale University Press, 1985, 10.

<sup>15</sup>Judith Lorber – Susan A. Farrell, ed., *The Social Construction of Gender*, 7.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Barbara Rogers, *The Domestication of Women*, London and New York: Tavistock Publications, 1980, 12.

<sup>17</sup>Carol P. MacCormack, “Nature, Culture and Gender: A Critique” in Carol P. MacCormack – Marilyn Strathern, ed., *Nature Culture and Gender*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, 13.

<sup>18</sup>Carol P. MacCormack, “Nature, Culture and Gender: A Critique,” 16.

and impetus to the renewal of moral theology in the light of the Second Vatican Council, which has emphasized human dignity as one of its important criterion. In contemporary world, most of the socio-cultural and religious values, traditions and practices remain male-oriented and women are appraised and forced to measure themselves by those values. Her worth is dependent on how much like a man she has become.<sup>19</sup> It is the time to accept today that women are full human persons with full dignity and their rights are human rights, and these human rights shared in common with men will rule out the subjection of women to what is called gender violence.<sup>20</sup>

Although the Church in India has taken one step forward to empower women in public sphere by bringing out Gender Policy, any concrete result of the Policy is yet to be seen in the absence of its proper promulgation and implementation. The Policy begins with some fascinating words on gender equality,

The Christian understanding of gender equality is based on the biblical account of creation. Man and woman are both created in the image and likeness of God, expressing a 'unity of the two' in a common humanity. [...] Equality between women and men is seen both as a human rights issue and as a pre-condition for, and indicator of, sustainable development.<sup>21</sup>

However, because of the perpetual depiction of Eve's image as a seductive temptress, women have been viewed with fear and suspicion and asked frequently to control, retain, regulate and harness their sexuality for procreative purpose. Susan L. Farrell depicts a thought provoking picture of such suspicion,

Throughout the history of Christianity and Roman Catholicism, theologians, moralists, and ethicists have inveighed against women as corrupt, weak, lustful, evil 'daughters of Eve' and to be avoided at all costs. Debates raged over whether women were fully human, possessed rational souls, or capable of redemption.<sup>22</sup>

The Second Vatican Council has indeed opened the windows for the fresh air in the field of moral theology by presenting human dignity

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<sup>19</sup>Cf. Jessie Bernard, *The Female World from a Global Perspective*, Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indian University Press, 1987, 161.

<sup>20</sup>Michael O'Sullivan, *How Roman Catholic Church can Transform Male Violence Against Women: Explaining the Role of Religion in Shaping Cultural Assumptions About Gender*, Lewiston (NY): The Edwin Mellen Press, 2010, 13.

<sup>21</sup>Catholic Bishops Conference of India, *Gender Policy of the Catholic Church of India*, New Delhi: CBCI Commission for Women, 2010, 1.

<sup>22</sup>Susan A. Farrell, "'It's Our Church, Too!' Women's Position in the Catholic Church Today," in Judith Lorber – Susan A. Farrell, ed., *The Social Construction of Gender*, 345.

of each person at the centre of moral discourse and conscience as the “voice of God” (GS, 16) for proper discernment in times of doubts and dilemmas.

### **Role of the Family in Enhancing Gender Justice and Moral Virtues**

Family, as the smallest unit of society and the Church, is the first and the most basic school of learning the fundamental socio-cultural and religious values. It is also an important school for moral development of children and for instilling in them a sense of equality, justice, compassion and solidarity with the larger human community. Socio-cultural, moral and religious values learnt by children in a family shape their behavioural pattern and worldview, which are carried through their adulthood in one form or the other. Since children are the future of a society, there can be no other conducive and perfect launching pad than family to promote gender justice, equality and respect for all irrespective of their sex, race, colour, social condition, language or religion which have to be overcome and eradicated as they are contrary to God’s intent (cf. GS, 29).

In any family, the role of women as life-givers cannot be interchanged with men; but the responsibility of bringing up children and doing household chores have every possibility of being interchanged and shared equally by both women and men. That would be a great initiation and incentive for a child to witness and learn equality and just power sharing between the parents within family. It is rightly said that,

in a just society, the structure and practices of families must give women the same opportunities as men to develop their capacities, to participate in political power and influence social choices, and to be economically secure. But in addition to this, families must be just because of the vast influence that they have on the moral development of children. The family is the primary institution of formative moral development.<sup>23</sup>

It cannot be denied that whatever children observe in and around their family leaves a lasting and deep impact in their moral development. The continued existence and practices of discrimination, injustice and violence against girls and women have “serious effects on the lives of almost all women and an increasingly large number of children.”<sup>24</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau narrate candidly the bitter fact that as a woman,

she is made to obey a being who is so imperfect, often so full of vices, and always so full of defects as man, she ought to learn early to endure even

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<sup>23</sup>Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, 22.

<sup>24</sup>Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, 25.



injustice and to bear a husband's wrongs without complaining. It is not for his sake, it is for her own, that she ought to be gentle. The bitterness and the stubbornness of women never do anything but increase their ills and the bad behavior of their husband.<sup>25</sup>

Unfortunately, the discrimination and injustice arising out of the traditional idea of gender-differentiated responsibilities in a family with husband as the earner and provider and wife as child bearer and family concierge,

continues to be a strong influence on what men and women think and how they behave. Husband, at least, tend to *feel* this way even when their wives *do* work outside the home; and when there is disagreement about whether the wife should work, it is more often the case that she wants to but that he does not want to 'let' her.<sup>26</sup>

Some concrete steps to rectify the prevalent gender differentiation within a family would be a vital step forward in altering the larger mind-set of human community.

The moral vision as perceived from the documents of the Second Vatican Council is a clear moving away from mere adherence to rules, regulations and laws prescribed by a society and bringing home the importance of human person and his/her dignity as the centre of moral discourse. The unity of moral precepts and practices would be adequately enhanced if a sense of equality and justice based on gender is cultivated and helped to flourish in a family. MacIntyre elucidates,

To ask 'What is good for me?' is to ask how best I might live out unity and bring it completion. To ask 'What is the good for man [and woman]?' is to ask what all answers to the former question must have in common. [...] It is the systematic asking of these two questions and the attempt to answer them in deed as well as in word which provide the moral life with its unity.<sup>27</sup>

Therefore, some serious efforts of instilling in the family ambit the socio-cultural and religious values based on equality and human dignity are bound to pave the way for a more rich understanding of morality and moral theology outside the family sphere, because most of the time, "the real domination of women has less to do with their familial place than with their exclusion from all other places."<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>25</sup>Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile: or On Education*, trans. Allan Bloom, New York: Basic Books, 1979, 370.

<sup>26</sup>Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family*, 141.

<sup>27</sup>Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 203.

<sup>28</sup>Michael L. Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*, New York: Basic Books, 1983, 240.

## **A Ray of Hope from Second Vatican Council for the Renewal of Moral Theology**

It has been already underlined that the Second Vatican Council has not given clear and concrete guidelines for the discipline of ethics and morality; however, from its insistence on the importance of human person, life and dignity can be easily noted in various documents, especially in *Optatam totius*, *Gadium et spes* and *Dignitatis humanae*, it can be inferred that its contributions have been profound and far-reaching in the renewal of moral theology. Richard A. McCormick puts it very clearly,

For many decades, even centuries, prior to Vatican II, Catholic moral theology conceived its chief task as being the training of priests to hear confessions. Within the sacramental perspectives of the times, the confessor was viewed as exercising a fourfold office: father, teacher, judge, physician. [...] The knowledge required of a confessor included many things, but above all knowledge of God's law as proposed by the Church, i.e., the Church's *magisterium*.<sup>29</sup>

James F. Keenan substantiates still further that,

until the Second Vatican Council, the moral theologian then determined what was permitted and what was prohibited in nearly every area of life. The laity may have understood to some extent how these theologians reasoned. But they were never taught this. Instead they were taught what the bottom-line verdicts were.<sup>30</sup>

Such legalistic and paternalistic approach in Catholic moral theology has been seen as an obstacle for the co-operation of Catholics with the rest of humanity. By moving away from the insistence on law to the importance of human person and dignity, the Second Vatican Council gave a new direction and meaning towards the common pursuit of truth and thus, paved the way for new collaboration, solidarity and respect for the whole human family and encouraged all the persons of good will to engage in dialogue to find adequate answers to the most intriguing moral questions of recent times:

Though [humankind] is stricken with wonder at its own discoveries and its power, it often raises anxious questions about the current trend of the world, about the place and role of man [and woman] in the universe, about the meaning of its individual and collective strivings, and about the ultimate destiny of reality and of humanity. Hence, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ,

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<sup>29</sup>Richard A. McCormick, "Self-Assessment and Self-Indictment," *Religious Studies Review* 13 (1987) 37.

<sup>30</sup>James F. Keenan, "Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II," 204.

this council can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems (GS, 3).

As it has been mentioned earlier, the concept of human person as the nucleus of the Second Vatican Council and human dignity as its major moral criterion can be put forward to articulate one of its notable contributions towards the process of the renewal of moral theology. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World explicates in clear terms that human dignity is “rooted and perfected in God” (GS, 21), which renders a person free, faithful and responsible. The Declaration on the Religious Freedom connects human dignity with freedom and responsibility for a proper moral judgment,

A sense of the dignity of the human person has been impressing itself more and more deeply on the consciousness of contemporary man, and the demand is increasingly made that men should act on their own judgment, enjoying and making use of a responsible freedom, not driven by coercion but motivated by a sense of duty (DH, 1).

It is true that in a strict sense of the term, morality can be applied only to a free person. Only in freedom that a person can turn himself or herself towards what is good (cf. GS, 17). This indicates how “the role of a moral theologian *vis-à-vis* the People of God [...] has shifted from being judge or arbiter to being teacher” and how this shift had “an enormous impact on the way Catholics think about morality”<sup>31</sup> after the Second Vatican Council.

An indication to the Council’s interest in the renewal of moral theology can be found in its invitation to all those who are involved in the field of moral theology to become teachers who help all people to reason well, rather than being prohibitors or permitters of particular actions. That is already an enormous shift from the understanding of moral theology prior to the Council.<sup>32</sup> James F. Keenan candidly expresses his point of view,

Our task since the Second Vatican Council has been to help others to reason rightly. Moreover, besides giving up our role of judging others’ actions, we no longer think of morals as simply avoiding sin. For the most part, we conceive of morals as what the Council commanded us to do: moral theology ‘should draw more fully on the teaching of the Holy Scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful

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<sup>31</sup>James F. Keenan, “Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II,” 201.

<sup>32</sup>James F. Keenan, “Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II,” 206.

in Christ and their obligation to bring forth in charity for the life of the world' (OT, 16).<sup>33</sup>

It is clear that Christian moral life and moral theology should be nourished by and based on Sacred Scripture. That is why the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World urges the faithful to live in a very close union with contemporary people and to strive to understand perfectly their way of thinking and judging, as expressed in their culture. Its exhortation continues further,

Let them blend new sciences and theories and the understanding of the most recent discoveries with Christian morality and the teaching of Christian doctrine, so that their religious culture and morality may keep pace with scientific knowledge and with the constantly progressing technology. Thus they will be able to interpret and evaluate all things in a truly Christian spirit (GS, 62).

The true Christian spirit does not leave any space for discrimination against anyone as far as life of faith in Jesus is concerned. St Paul rightly emphasizes that all are equal in Jesus Christ; there is no superior or inferior in terms of gender, race, ethnicity or class (cf. Gal 3:28). With such assertions, a question that spontaneously pops up is: In more than fifty years since the end of the Second Vatican Council, "what can we say about [*Address of Pope Paul VI to Women*] themes and the present reality of women? The Holy Father was certainly correct when he, as in *Gaudium et Spes*, affirmed the 'signs of the times' with regard to the opening of society and the Church to the greater engagement and participation of women."<sup>34</sup> It has to be remembered that "reading the signs of the times" had become a leitmotif of the Second Vatican Council and today, the role of women in society and within the Church is becoming an evident sign which cannot be ignored or missed.<sup>35</sup> The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World launches a clear warning, "When a divine instruction and the hope of life eternal are wanting, human dignity is most grievously lacerated, as current events often attest; riddles of life and death, of guilt and of grief go unsolved with the frequent result that human beings succumb to

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<sup>33</sup>James F. Keenan, "Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II," 207.

<sup>34</sup>Diana L. Hayes, "To Women. If It Wasn't for the Women: Roman Catholic Church and Their Church," in Anthony Ciorra – Michael W. Higgins, ed., *Vatican II: A Universal Call to Holiness*, Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012, 50. See also Ivy Helman, *Women and the Vatican: An Exploration of Official Documents*, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012, 30.

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Dolores R. Leckey, *Rediscovering Vatican II: The Laity and Christian Education*, New York/Mahwah (NJ): Paulist Press, 2006, 13.

despair" (GS, 21). These words describe the situation of women today, which undoubtedly gives rise to despair, grief and frustration. The seeds of gender justice is already found in the biblical narration of man and women being created in the "image and likeness" of the Creator (Gen 1:26) and the divine instruction for both of them to "be fertile and multiply" (Gen 1:28). That is why the same Document encourages those in the field of moral theology to enter into dialogue with others who are engaged in searching for the appropriate answers in constructing a more humane and just social order and to strive together "in the light of the Gospels" to solve the problems faced by humanity encouraging others in search for truth through "loyalty to conscience" (GS, 16, 43). Gender-based discrimination against women is one of the problems which has to be addressed urgently and the Documents of the Second Vatican Council offer a suitable platform to study, research and propose the remedial measures so that precepts of moral theology take into consideration its recommendations of putting human dignity of each and every individual as a centre of free and responsible decision on matters pertaining to morality guided by his or her own judgment and responsible freedom (DH, 11). From these perspectives, moral theology can renew itself, generate new interests and enrich itself by inter-disciplinary studies and research.

### **Future Prospects and Challenges**

It should be noted that the draft of the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium* was silent about one-half of humanity, i.e., women. Narrating the appointment of ten women religious and thirteen laywomen as the auditors during the Second Vatican Council, Dolores R. Leckey takes note of the experiences and questions of Rosemary Goldie, an Australian theologian appointed as one of the auditors, "Pope Paul VI announced at a Mass celebrated at Castel Gandolfo on September 8, 1964, his intention to include 'qualified and dedicated women' as auditors. 'These women,' said the Pope, 'would discuss matters of particular interest to women.'" Goldie asks, interestingly, 'What matters of Church life would *not* be of interest to women?'"<sup>36</sup> The reaction of Goldie reflects the growing ardent desire of women overcome the gender-based discrimination, bias and exclusion from public as well as the Church sphere. The

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<sup>36</sup>Dolores R. Leckey, *Rediscovering Vatican II: The Laity and Christian Education*, 12. See also Rosemary Goldie, *From a Roman Window: Five Decades of the World, the Church and the Laity*, Melbourne: HarperCollins, 1998, 70-71.

women appointed as auditors rightly believed that “documents such as *Gaudium et spes* should take a strong stand against discrimination but should avoid any attempt to define particular roles for women or describe personality traits inherent in women,”<sup>37</sup> precisely because all Christians are invited to share fully the life of faith, hope, love and human dignity and thus, called to a life of holiness.<sup>38</sup> In this context, it would be apt to mention *aggiornamento* or bringing up to date, a term employed by John XXIII to capture his agenda for the Second Vatican Council, which later almost became synonymous with the Church renewal fostered by the Council. *Aggiornamento* is “reminiscent of the Latin phrase *ecclesia semper reformanda*, the Church must always be reforming; she always needs renewal, revitalization, transformation, conversion, change, and growth.”<sup>39</sup> The spirit of *aggiornamento* offers a strong challenge to strive towards constant renewal of every aspect of human life with gender justice on top of the agenda for the current life situation.

The importance of conscience put forward strongly by the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World as the most secret core and sanctuary of human beings is another fundamental dimension which can play a vital role in the renewal of moral theology. According to the Document, conscience is the voice of God, which echoes in his or her depths and guides him or her to choose what is good and to avoid what is evil (cf. GS, 16). Therefore, one must not be forced to act contrary to his or her conscience; nor must he or she be prevented from acting according to his or her conscience (cf. DH, 3). A person, acting under the guidance of his or her morally right conscience, without any blind internal impulse or external pressure (cf. GS, 17), would be able to work with freedom towards the eradication of gender-based discrimination, inequality and injustice. Thus, on the one hand the path shown by the Second Vatican Council sheds light of hope on the future prospects of gender justice and equality; on the other hand, it also underlines the challenges in the form of gender-based discrimination and injustice, because denying or limiting women’s equality of rights with men is “fundamentally unjust and constitutes an offence against human

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<sup>37</sup>Dolores R. Leckey, *Rediscovering Vatican II: The Laity and Christian Education*, 13.

<sup>38</sup>Dennis Doyle, *The Church Emerging from Vatican II*, New London (CT): Twenty-Third Publications, 2009, 116.

<sup>39</sup>James H. Kroeger, *Exploring the Treasures of Vatican II*, Quezon City: Claretian Publications, 2011, 6.

dignity.”<sup>40</sup> Indeed, an inspired commitment of all is needed to overcome misogyny which is deeply embedded in socio-cultural and religious spheres.

In the future, renewal of moral theology will be completed only when fundamental human rights of both men and women are taken care, namely, “the right to life, to equality, to liberty and security of person, to equal protection under the law, to be free from all forms of discrimination, to the highest standard attainable of physical and mental health, to just and favorable conditions of work, and to not be subjected to torture, or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.”<sup>41</sup> The challenge posed by gender-based discrimination can be overcome only by an expansive and all-inclusive understanding and respect of the integrity of human person, his or her human rights and fundamental freedom. At present in the fast changing scenario, as the phenomenon of violence against women receives more attention, terms and their meanings will become clearer, more distinct and audible for the larger public,<sup>42</sup> and thus, inspire the men and women of good will to work for a more humane and just society without any gender-based discrimination, inequality and injustice.

## Conclusion

In his Message to Women, Paul VI entrusted women to a specific task, “Women of the entire universe, whether Christian or non-believing, you to whom life is entrusted at this grave moment in history, it is for you to save the peace of the world.”<sup>43</sup> According to Ivy Helman, *Address of Pope Paul VI to Women* “beseeches women to use their special abilities for caring, truth, love, and guidance to help men become more life affirming. In this way women are charged with saving civilization from self-implosion and re-directing humanity to more loving, caring, and responsible ways to live on Planet Earth.”<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>40</sup>United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2263 (7 November 1967), *Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women*, Art. 1. Cf. Lars Adam Rehof, *Guide to the Travaux Préparatoires of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women*, Dordrecht: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1993, 244.

<sup>41</sup>Michael O’Sullivan, *How Roman Catholic Church can Transform Male Violence Against Women*, 15.

<sup>42</sup>Michael O’Sullivan, *How Roman Catholic Church can Transform Male Violence Against Women*, 25.

<sup>43</sup>Paul VI, “Message to Women,” 111.

<sup>44</sup>Ivy Helman, *Women and the Vatican: An Exploration of Official Documents*, Maryknoll (NY): Orbis Books, 2012, 11.

And that will happen only when women are accepted and respected with their full human dignity and equal rights without any discrimination based on sex or gender. Challenges and counter-forces will always be there, because the desire to maintain status quo and privileges is part of human nature. And to achieve true gender justice and equality, "there would have to be social structural changes in psychological development, sexual dominance, economic and cultural production, and parenting."<sup>45</sup> Without a radical change in traditional socio-cultural and religious point of view of treating women as inferior to men, any talk of gender justice will be futile, even if they are called time and again "flowers of life, civilizers of human race, queens of our belief and of our moral order."<sup>46</sup>

It would be suitable to conclude with an important lesson learnt by James F. Keenan from Josef Fuchs, a noted moral theologian who taught almost for thirty years in Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome, regarding the renewal of moral theology after the Second Vatican Council. The Council taught "to teach others how to reason well with the tools from the tradition so that we may not worry so much about whether we do wrong, but whether we are following Christ."<sup>47</sup> His experiences substantiate what has been discussed earlier that the Second Vatican Council has given some new directions to live what one preaches and help others to live according to the guidance of conscience, the voice of God. Since, the gender-based discrimination, injustice and violence are the issues that disturb the right conscience and also break the social fabric, gender justice could be a desired impetus to the renewal of moral theology as directed by the Second Vatican Council. Finally, it is evident that "[...] the plethora of ideas offered by Vatican II — revolutionary and dynamic ideas of all, whether taken singly or collectively — will be largely ineffective except in the full acceptance of the basic idea of participation."<sup>48</sup> The full-fledge active participation will be realized only when every human person without any discrimination works to bring about a change — a socio-cultural change which involves all. Such changes envisage a new moral order based on equality, justice and human dignity.

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<sup>45</sup>Judith Lorber – Susan A. Farrell, ed., *The Social Construction of Gender*, 311.

<sup>46</sup>Cited in L.J. Jordanova, "Natural Facts: A Historical Perspective on Science and Sexuality," in Carol MacCormack – Marilyn Strathern, ed., *Nature, Culture and Gender*, 58.

<sup>47</sup>James F. Keenan, "Learning to Reason Well: Moral Theology Since Vatican II," 219.

<sup>48</sup>Francisco F. Claver, "The Church in Asia Twenty and Forty Years after Vatican II," in James H. Kroeger, *Exploring the Treasures of Vatican II*, 126.