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Is the Church Defenseless Against Sociocultural Changes? Which Moral Theology Provides the Response to this Modern Challenge?

A reflection on Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's Essay "The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse"

A close relationship exists between the moral crisis within the Church that came about due to the sexual revolution and the collapse of moral theology that occurred at precisely the same time. Newer approaches to morality could not address the overwhelming crisis and, therefore, insufficiently responded to the demand for absolute freedom within the sphere of human sexuality; in other words, moral theology was defenseless in the face of the changes that took place after the sexual revolution. Inspired by the events of the past, moral theologians thus sought out models of moral theology that would prevent it from being "defenseless" in the face of the modern sociocultural changes that were taking place. As a result, moral theologians discovered that moral theology should be closely connected with Revelation and, at the same time, be rooted in natural law; demonstrate the primacy of charity; be based on faith in God; maintain its ecclesial, normative, and social character; and reject cheap popularity and momentary applause.

Key words: Benedict XVI, sexual revolution, moral crisis, moral theology.

Every era faces specific moral and spiritual threats. Therefore, these threats must be continually reevaluated and updated.¹ This does not mean that sociologist should only describe the trends, phenomena, and changes that take place in a given era, they should also seek to find ways to counteract and overcome destructive forces within society and culture. From a theological point of view, such moral and spiritual threats should be perceived as nothing but a challenge that needs to be addressed.

Theologians can approach these threats in two ways: either they can focus on the details, or they can uncover certain general changes that lie at the heart of these problems. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI takes up this second approach in his essay “The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse,” which was published on April 11, 2019 in the German periodical for clergy, *Klerusblatt*.

In this document, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI discusses the correlation between the moral crisis of the sexual revolution and the collapse of moral theology that took place at the very same time. This collapse—as Benedict XVI writes—rendered the Church defenseless against the social changes that were taking place.²

The dramatic events of the past, the aftermath of which has been—among other things—pedophilia, inspires theologians to seek features of moral theology that are able to respond to contemporary sociocultural changes and also avoid the same fate as other approaches to examining moral issues that took place during the latter half of the 20th century, beginning in the 1960s. And so the question remains: What kind of moral theology is appropriate for this day and age?

The General Characteristics of Modern Sociocultural Changes

Theological and moral approaches are always developed within a specific social and cultural context. Without a doubt, the primary task

¹ Polish moral theology is particularly kairological. The topic of moral challenges is discussed often in publications and at academic conferences such as, for example, the three national academic conventions/conferences/meetings of the Section of Polish Moral Theologians (which is currently known as the Association of Moral Theologians) in 1998, 1999, and 2000. The ideas presented during these meetings have been respectively compiled into three volumes: *Wyzwania moralne przełomu tysiącleci*, ed. J. Nagórny, A. Derdziuk, Lublin 1999; *Moralne aspekty przemian cywilizacyjnych*, ed. J. Nagórny, A. Derdziuk, Lublin 2001.

² Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church and the Scandal of Sexual Abuse* (accessed 04.11.2019), I.2.

of these approaches is to interpret the moral message of Revelation.³ This, however, always takes place in relation to the current situation of man and the world.⁴ Therefore, it is not possible to understand the specifics of the moral theology of a given era without entering into *kairos*, which, whether desirable or not, leaves its mark on moral theology.

Here is neither the time nor the place to describe all of the manifestations of the relationship between moral theology and society and culture throughout history.⁵ For the purpose of this article it is sufficient to refer to a few examples. Without a doubt, a general social situation (i.e., the historical and cultural context) determines which issues moral theology will take up and emphasize (e.g., During the first centuries of Christianity, the persecution of Christians led to the development of the theology of martyrdom and imitation of Christ in the moral life through suffering⁶). In turn, the systemic context influences whether certain issues are up for discussion and whether these issues will be connected to a complete concept of the moral life (e.g., legalism reduces all of morality to obedience or disobedience to the law).⁷

Here we arrive at the question: What is the context from which current moral theology has arisen? In the introduction of his essay, Benedict XVI states that the context is a crisis of faith and of the Church.⁸ Later, he defines this context as “the dissolution of the Christian concept of morality [as well as the] the dissolution of the teaching authority of the Church.”⁹ Not only did people not listen to the Church, the Church was forced into silence on matters of morality. In short, according to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, contemporary sociocultural changes aim to provoke a crisis of faith and even to question the faith of the Church. All of these changes, particularly those

³ Por. J. Nagórny, “Natura teologii moralnej,” in *Polska teologia moralna czterdzieści lat po Soborze Watykańskim II*, eds. J. Nagórny, J. Gocko, Lublin 2006, pg. 110; I. Mroczkowski, *Teologia moralna. Definicja – przedmiot – metoda*, Płock 2011, pg. 42.

⁴ Por. John Paul II, Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, no. 112. Hereafter abbreviated as VS.

⁵ Historians of moral theology describe this issue in detail. See, for example: F. Greniuk, “W jakiej mierze teologia moralna w różnych okresach swych dziejów była nauką o Bogu?” in *Ks. Franciszek Greniuk. Studia z teologii moralnej*, Sandomierz 2006, pgs. 217-218.

⁶ Por. J. Pryzmont, *Historia teologii moralnej*, Warsaw 1987, pg. 19.

⁷ Por. F. Greniuk, *Teologia moralna w swej przeszłości*, Sandomierz 2006, pgs. 28-29.

⁸ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, Introduction.

⁹ *Ibid.*, II.1.

meant to deeply shock individuals, are directed precisely toward this aim. Those behind these changes also strive to present the Church as unreliable in Her moral teaching.

These changes did not arise today; rather, they began much earlier in the 1960s when, as Benedict XVI says, an “egregious event [the sexual revolution] occurred, on a scale unprecedented in history.”¹⁰ In essence, the sexual revolution sought to change how people approached human sexuality. The previously held standards for human sexuality were destroyed and the norms collapsed. The aim of those who brought about these changes was to achieve absolute sexual freedom. This approach to sexuality then provoked a spiritual crisis, one of the results of which was an extensive collapse in vocations to the priesthood.¹¹ Those behind the sexual revolution achieved their goal extensively throughout Western Europe and, today, partly in Poland.

The dissolution of the Christian concept of morality is taking place in a newer and more radical way today. These changes affect different areas of life, and are evident in practical actions. They have not only wreak religious and moral indifferentism, but also mounted an (even physical) attack on the sacred sphere, which can be seen both in the vocation crisis and in the way that people encourage and praise those who abandon the priesthood. The biblical figure of the accuser is an apt representation the radicalism that is characteristic of the contemporary sociocultural changes that have been taking place. In this regard, Pope Benedict XVI refers to the Book of Revelation where the devil is depicted as the accuser “who accuses them before our God day and night” (Rev 12:10). This passage clearly brings to mind the story of Job whose righteousness before God Satan strives to belittle by claiming that it is merely external (see Job 1 and 2:10; 42:7-16). The pope applies this image to today’s situation: Job represents Jesus Christ and the Church. Modern accusers, writes Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, strive to discredit the Church in Her entirety and, in so doing, draw people away from Her.¹² As current statistics prove, these individuals and entities’ efforts are very effective.¹³ They no longer want to see

¹⁰ Por. Ibid, Introduction.

¹¹ Por. Ibid, I.1.

¹² Por. Ibid, III.3.

¹³ The Institute for Statistics on the Catholic Church conducts studies on the religiosity of Poles. The results of these studies indicate that, not only are there fewer vocations to the priesthood, but so too are fewer people participating in Mass on Sundays and accepting the Church’s teachings on certain moral issues. Por. <http://www.iskk.pl/>

witnesses and martyrs—people who defend God with their lives and suffering—within the Church. Instead, both national and international institutions work together to “accuse” the Church.¹⁴

And so what approach to moral theology can address the challenges posed by the sociocultural changes that have and continue to take place? In order to answer this question, it is first necessary to consider Pope Benedict XVI’s assessment of moral theology.

The Crisis of Faith and the Crisis of Moral Theology

When analyzing what occurred during the 1960s, Benedict XVI points out that Catholic moral theology collapsed after the sexual revolution.¹⁵ It is important to recall that this took place after the Second Vatican Council, which was—at least theoretically—supposed to be a time of renewal of moral theology. In practice, however, a serious crisis within moral theology and its disciplines took place, and Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI perceives this crisis to be the source of the Church’s defenselessness against societal changes that have taken place since then.

The Second Vatican Council unequivocally demanded that moral theology be renewed through a scriptural approach.¹⁶ In practice, however, this approach practically abandoned natural law, upon which moral theology had previously been based, and made sacred Scripture, which had formerly cited for background, the focus. It soon became apparent, however, that moral theology could not be systematically understood and presented through Scripture and that a solely biblical approach was unable to sufficiently respond to the moral crisis.¹⁷

The paradigm of this moral theology that upheld that morality could be defined solely by the aims of human action proved to be the second way in which this approach was insufficient. As Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI asserts, “While the old phrase ‘the end justifies the means’ was not confirmed in this crude form, its way of thinking had become definitive.”¹⁸ Rejecting the existence of absolute good and absolute evil and asserting that relative value judgments that are contingent

¹⁴ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, I.1.

¹⁵ Por. Ibid. I.2.

¹⁶ Por. Second Vatican Council, Decree on Priestly Formation *Optatam Totius*, no. 16. Hereafter abbreviated as OT.

¹⁷ Here Benedict XVI gives the example of Schüller, who unsuccessfully tried to develop a morality based entirely on Sacred Scripture. *The Church...*, I.2.

¹⁸ Benedict XVI, *The Church*, I.2.

on the circumstances instead were only the tip of the iceberg of this crisis, which culminated in people's questioning the Magisterium of the Church's role in theology. Theologians themselves also forbid the Church (bishops and the pope) from determining whether certain actions are exteriorly good or evil. Moreover, the hypothesis that "the Magisterium of the Church should have final competence (*infallibility*) only in matters concerning the faith itself gained widespread acceptance; (in this view) questions concerning morality should not fall within the scope of infallible decisions of the Magisterium of the Church."¹⁹

The crisis of moral theology became very apparent in its view on the faith. Even theologians treated the faith as a theory that could not be applied to real life and, therefore, forced the Church to remain silent on matters that concerned the line between good and evil, truth and lies. Theologians questioned the Christian property and specifics of morality and sought moral parallels in other religions instead. The culmination of the crisis of moral theology occurred in the 1980s and 1990s when moral theologians rejected absolute moral norms, focused on the purpose of human action, repudiated the authority of the Church, and made "conciliarity" the norm. Along with the moral crisis (or, rather, collapse) of moral theology, the moral decline of particular individuals and society at large occurred to such a degree that moral theology could not respond to this crisis.

At this point, one might wonder to what extent the devastating crisis in moral theology affected Poland. Fortunately, the situation in Poland was considerably better than in other countries due to the fact very few theologians in Polish seminaries and theology departments, proposed (like Franz Böckle, as Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI mentioned by name in his essay) hypotheses that asserted that actions that are in every circumstance and case absolutely morally evil exist. Unlike theologians in the West, Polish moral theologians did not criticize Pope John Paul II's assertions in his encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* that absolute moral goods and evils exist.²⁰ In addition, Polish theologians

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ This criticism is conveyed in the publication *Za i przeciw encyklice Veritatis splendor. Echa w prasie francuskiej* by Jan Choroszy (Wrocław–Lupstein 1994). On the other hand, the book *Wokół encykliki Veritatis splendor*, ed. J. Merecki, Częstochowa 1994 presents a positive reception of this document in Poland. Topics and Church documents on morality have been contested much more in the West. A. Marcol writes more broadly on this topic in the article "Urząd nauczycielski Kościoła a teologia moralna w ostatnim 40-leciu," in: *Polska teologia moralna czterdzieści lat po Soborze Watykańskim II*, op.cit., pgs. 35-37.

incorporated Scripture into their approaches to moral theology without unequivocally disregarding moral theology's foundation in the natural law. Polish moral theology has always been doctrinally sound,²¹ and it is for this reason that Polish moral theology is often accused of being too faithful to the Church and to the pope.

Despite everything, the moral crisis did not end. The outlooks and changes that have occurred in the West since the 1960s have made their way to Poland with perhaps even greater strength and attack society and culture with even greater force. The questions, therefore, remain: What approach to moral theology is able to withstand such attacks? Does such a theology even exist? What elements should a theology of man and his actions have and what should this theology be so that it can assist man in facing these changes and counteracting the evil that is often hidden (or sometimes even very evident and attractive) in them.

The Determinants of a Moral Theology that Can Withstand Modern Sociocultural Changes

The turbulent course that contemporary sociocultural changes have taken has given rise to a desire to create a new Church and a new theology within some parts of Europe and the world.²² As Benedict XVI points out, such experiments are nothing new, and when they have occurred, they always ended in failure. As he writes, "Only obedience and love for our Lord Jesus Christ can point the way."²³ The theology that Benedict XVI proposes must be based on the Bible. It is a paradoxical that it is necessary to remind ourselves of this truth today, as if another theology had once existed. Sadly, the reality is that another approach to theology does exist for some people. These individuals try to create their own "theology" that differs greatly from the theology that flows from Revelation and is based only on the democratic principle of the majority and method of negotiation.

²¹ Por. F. Greniuk, "W poszukiwaniu tożsamości polskiej teologii moralnej," in: *Ks. Franciszek Greniuk. Studia z teologii moralnej*, pg. 41; S. Olejnik, "Wokół przed- i posoborowej odnowy teologii moralnej. Relacja uczestnika," in: *Polska teologia moralna czterdzieści lat po Soborze Watykańskim II*, op.cit., pgs. 13-29.

²² For example, the "synodal way," which means that ecclesiastics or other delegates assemble to discuss and make decisions on questions of the faith and the Church's teachings on morality (including sexual ethics), was initially proposed by the German bishops in the spring of 2019 is an example of this desire.

²³ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, III.1.

The Pope synthesizes the content of faith set forth in the Bible as follows:

the Lord has initiated a narrative of love with us and wants to subsume all creation in it. The counterforce against evil, which threatens us and the whole world, can ultimately only consist in our entering into this love. It is the real counterforce against evil. The power of evil arises from our refusal to love God. He who entrusts himself to the love of God is redeemed. Our being not redeemed is a consequence of our inability to love God. Learning to love God is therefore the path of human redemption.²⁴

Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes the special place that love has in the history of salvation and, therefore, in theology. This love is the love that God first bestows on man, and the love that flows as man response to his Creator and Savior. Since, according to Benedict XVI, love is precisely the antidote to evil, it would be wrong to characterize the moral life as man's autonomous struggle against evil and striving for his own perfection. Here, then, is the first assertion of a theology that can respond to sociocultural challenges: the primacy of love.

Elaborating on the basic content of Divine Revelation, Pope Benedict XVI points to the fundamental gift of faith, which is the certainty that God exists and, even more, reveals Himself and makes Himself known.²⁵ This is the truth that must determine the standards of the good and evil of human behavior. The basic task of theology in general (and moral theology in particular) is to restore to man the human awareness of the truth that God, who "is," simultaneously creates and is love. When seeking the determinants of a moral theology that is able to adequately respond to contemporary challenges, it is important to remember that contemporary society does not know God and treats Him as if He does not exist. In such societies, it is as if God has died. He is absent from the public sphere. Along with God, true freedom has died and the dividing line between good and evil—the measure of humanity—has disappeared. What is evil and destroys man has become the norm. God has become a private matter of the minority.²⁶

Within theology God is also taken for granted as a given, but in reality—as Benedict XVI conveys—modern theologians do study Him. As a result, the topic of God seems so unreal and so far removed from the very things that concern us.²⁷ In this way, the Holy Father seems

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

to return to the old question: Is a theology without faith possible? His response to this question is an unequivocal “No.” Rather than becoming the masters of faith, we should allow ourselves to be renewed and mastered by it.²⁸ Since atheism has proved itself to be destructive to both man and society, moral theology cannot remain silent about God. Rather, instead of ignoring God like some unreal platitude, moral theology must learn again and teach others to acknowledge that God is the foundation of life. Moreover, moral theologians should make it their task to turn to God and live in Him. In this way, moral theology has a very practical aim, even though—according to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI—speaking about God does not seem practical. For, is not the topic of responsibility, particularly responsibility before God, directed toward a Christian praxis—something of which moral theology cannot be accused?²⁹

Pope Benedict XVI points out the close relationship between the moral life (as well as moral theology) and the sacraments, especially the Eucharist.³⁰ Proper participation in the Eucharist renews man’s faith, which, in turn, bears spiritual fruit in his life. The modern approach to faith and the sacraments reveals a broader problem of modern man’s approach to the Church in general. Like God, the Church has died in souls. Today the Church is universally perceived as a kind of political machine. People speak about the Church exclusively in political terms. This way of speaking is, unfortunately, common among bishops and theologians who consider the Church a failure that they need to take in hand and form anew. Pope Benedict XVI warns against such an attitude: “But a self-made Church cannot constitute hope.”³¹

The sexual revolution and its effects as well as the moral theology that has arisen in its wake prove that descriptive ethics does not work during particularly turbulent sociocultural change. In an age where norms have collapsed, moral theology must be normative, meaning that it must courageously present and substantiate norms, formulate moral principles, and even defend values.³² During this revolution, people and moral theologians compromised, and this compromise has resulted in consequentialism and relativism. By determining whether a particular action is good solely by analyzing the anticipated effects of

²⁸ Ibid, III.2.

²⁹ Por. T. Zadykiewicz, “Chrystopraksyzm refleksji teologicznomoralnej,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 61(2014), z. 3, pgs. 49-64.

³⁰ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, III.2.

³¹ Ibid, III.3.

³² Por. John Paul II, VS, no. 111.

a concrete choice, the faithful were led to question whether absolutely immoral behaviors exist, meaning those actions that go against values determined by reason and Revelation are in every circumstance and in every culture. These kinds of moral theological “experiments” had considerably more negative effects than those stated here.

As mentioned above, Polish moral theologians did not vehemently oppose the Church’s doctrinal texts like moral theologians in other Western countries did. The Western approach to moral theology that was characteristic of the end of the 20th century is sometimes still being proposed today, especially by those who form popular opinion and among those who are in positions of authority. According to these entities and individuals, the Church must remain silent regarding the line that separates good and evil.

What, therefore should this Polish (and not only Polish) moral theology for today’s times look like so that it does not share in the same fate as the theology developed during the latter half of the 20th century? According to Benedict XVI, this moral theology should primarily preserve its Christian quality and Catholic specifics. This means, therefore, that moral theology must acknowledge the biblical roots of morality. The response to the modern sociocultural changes that have taken place must be a renewal of moral theology by nourishing it through the Bible—in other words, a (re)biblicization that, however, does not mean Biblicism and, therefore, does not reject the reason of natural law. As a result of this “biblicization,” moral theology will cease to be the study of man and will become once again the study of God who loves man and calls him to “[bear] fruit in charity for the life of the world.”³³

Both today and always Catholic moral theology is specifically ecclesial. In other words, moral theology must be cultivated within the Church. Furthermore, it must present the Church as a community and instrument through which God saves man.³⁴ It must acknowledge the authority of the Magisterium of the Church in questions of faith and morals, rather than trying to create a new Church. Within the field of Catholic moral theology, theologians should not strive to create a new modern “catholicity.” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI speaks very decisively about such attempts: “The idea of a better Church, created by ourselves, is in fact a proposal of the devil, with which he wants to lead us away from the living God, through a deceitful logic by which

³³ Por. Second Vatican Council, OT, no. 16.

³⁴ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, III.3.

we are too easily duped.”³⁵ The task of moral theology is to help man discover the living Church and recognize Her witnesses. The Church must realize its role as the “light among peoples and as a force in service against the powers of destruction.”³⁶

Today moral theology should demonstrate the close relationship between faith and morality. It should be based on faith, which is also an important legal asset that must be defended and strongly emphasized in a particular way today.³⁷ For, we live in a time when we must defend faith and morality. In this way, moral theology is also a field that has its own type of apologetics. Benedict XVI warns against a “false form of apologetics” that—as he says—proclaims neither the existence of good and evil in the world nor permits the consideration that good will have the final victory at the end of time.³⁸ Moral theology must serve the Truth. It cannot be made into “conciliarity” in the negative sense. Such conciliarity would involve criticizing or even rejecting everything that has come before, replacing tradition with something new, and being radically open to the world.³⁹

It is necessary to restore a social character to morality and moral theology. It seems that, after the post-conciliar reorientation in this direction,⁴⁰ morality became too individualistic once again. Moreover, this morality should take on anew a participatory view of freedom and show how secularism is a threat to such freedom. In order to respond to a demoralized culture, this moral theology also should not fear to present morality as new and different way of living that must necessarily be protected from widespread and commonly accepted ways of living.

Benedict XVI also warns against the intellectual pride of those who consider themselves clever.⁴¹ He mentions this as a brief digres-

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, Introduction.

³⁷ Por. Ibid, II.2.

³⁸ Por. Ibid, III.3.

³⁹ Benedict XVI attributes these features to an incorrect understanding of the “conciliar attitude” that became the criteria for the appointment of new bishops after the Second Vatican Council. Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, II.1.

⁴⁰ J. Gocko Writes extensively about this process. Por. “Społeczna reorientacja teologii moralnej po Soborze Watykańskim II,” in: *Teologia moralna u kresu II tysiąclecia*, eds. J. Nagórny, K. Jeżyna, Lublin 1998, pgs. 123-150; “Teologia moralna społeczna jako nowy obszar badań teologii moralnej po Soborze Watykańskim II,” in: *Polska teologia moralna czterdzieści lat po Soborze Watykańskim II*, op. cit., pgs. 183-194; *Nauka społeczna Kościoła w poszukiwaniu własnej tożsamości*, Warsaw 2013, pgs. 88-111.

⁴¹ Por. Benedict XVI, *The Church...*, II.2.

sion when commenting on what Jesus said about scandalizing and confounding the faith of the “little ones,” meaning common believers (por. Mk 9:42). I do not think that it is too much to assume that Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI was addressing these words to moral theologians: let us not seek cheap popularity by shocking and scandalizing the “little ones” with the things that we say on the internet, in this or that magazine, or on a particular television station. It is our task to participate in the *munus propheticum* of Christ and the Church—to proclaim the Commandments and Christ’s love; teach the norms that the Church upholds; seek deeper rational substantiations for the Church’s teachings; convict others about the validity and importance of Her precepts; expose the biblical foundations, ethical meanings, and anthropological motivations of Her moral doctrine; and present people with new arguments in favor of believing and living in accordance with the faith⁴² rather than seeking their own satisfaction by being approved of and praised.

Cicero once wrote, “History is life’s teacher.” When analyzing the mutual relationship between the moral and theological crises of the past, it is worthwhile to question what kind of moral theology today would be able to withstand the fate of the theology that was developed in the latter half of the 20th century. While the features mentioned above certainly would not stop destructive sociocultural changes, and while many people will not readily consider the response of this particular moral theology sufficient and convincing, our identity and fidelity (or infidelity) to Christ, the Church, and man are at stake.

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