



IN SEARCH OF THE KINGDOM

morals for the new millenium

Joan Carrera i Carrera

0. Introduction
1. Morals for the new millennium
2. “Autonomous crowned-by-faith-in-Christ” morals
3. Morals in dialogue
4. Old and new Challenges for Christian morals
5. Notes
6. Questionnaire for work in groups

Joan Carrera i Carrera, sj., (Barcelona 1960), is a doctor both in Medicine and Theology, a professor of Fundamental Morals in ISCREB (Inst. Sup. Ciencias Religiosas), and in the Theological Faculty of Catalunya, as well as in the Institute of Fundamental Theology (Sant Cugat). He is a member of Instituto Borja de Bioética and of *Centre d'Estudis Cristianisme i Justícia*.

INTRODUCTION

*“When we open out to dialogue with others,
we are opening out to a dialogue with God”*

John Paul II

With the change of century, our world is living perhaps one of the most profound transformations of its history. What we call “globalisation” has turned that wide world that our ancestors inhabited into a *global village*. A world in which, thanks to the enormous capacity for communication and transport, different nations and cultures are in contact with each other with unusual intensity.

No longer are societies of our globalised world those compact societies which used to share *one* homogeneous culture. In those bygone days, other societies and cultures, being as they were, sufficiently far apart and sufficiently unknown, were considered as something “strange”, alien, and generally “barbaric” and “uncivilised”.

But this is no longer possible at the current moment. Today we go to a *Chinese restaurant* when eating out; we look for a Peruvian woman to look after our grandmothers; our children share the same desk with a girl who always wears a veil over her head and celebrates *Ramadan*; we buy clothes made by women of the Far East; and our neighbours have adopted a child from the Bolivian high plateau.

Challenges for Ethics

These new circumstances have placed on the agenda a reflection on themes such as “tolerance”, respect for difference, need for dialogue. It is necessary that we be capable of getting on well with “any person” of our universe. How can we establish guidelines that could be common to all and could thereby permit us to live in harmony amidst the great diversity of our world? What principles should be shared by any person, of whatever country or creed, to be able to live in harmony? This is the first ethical challenge of our times.

Simple though it might seem, the question is anything but simple. The first temptation one must avoid is to confuse respect for difference with the acceptance of “anything”. The rejection of all kinds of intolerance has generated a rejection of the “Sacred Books” that claim “the totality” of what they say is right. Moral behaviour, consequently, should find its foundations in the strictly subjective sphere. An instance with universal value could perhaps work out “dangerous” as it could serve as a handle for any type of fundamentalism or neo-fascism (in any of its rightist or leftist versions). Present day moral subjectivist tendencies stem from this situation.

However, radical subjectivism cannot be accepted by Christian morals as Christian morals stem from the assumption of a project: the Kingdom of God. A Kingdom that proposes a whole constellation of values. For this reason, all that man does *can never be indifferent*, it is either in favour of or against this Kingdom. That is to say, there exists a certain objectivity in all Christian ethical propositions. Here then is a new challenge: Morals that can be “autonomous” (based on subjectivity) and, at the same time, objective.

Finally, it is necessary to say that the new times in which we live have posed problems that up to now were non-existent.

On the one hand, we find ourselves faced with certain matters that affect the whole of humanity: the ecological question, international commerce, commerce of arms, external debt of impoverished countries, financial globalisation, etc. We are confronted with topics that call for agreements of a global reach, and which demand, therefore, the participation of all those who are implied in the matter.

On the other hand, technical progress has given rise to new situations which imply new rights and obligations, and which call for an ethical stance: cloning, genetic engineering, xenotransplants, use of foetal, transgenic tissues, new military technologies, Internet, etc.

With all these premises, Christian morals, are obliged to cope not only with the usual topics of perennial interest, but will also have to face the new issues that derive from the new situation.

This being so, a Christian ethical proposition for the XXI century will have to be put forward in defence both of the autonomy of human subjectivity as well as the objectivity of evangelical values; it will have to be established with the participation of all; and it will have to face the new questions that have arisen. And, besides, the Church will be obliged not to limit herself to just giving an ethical orientation.

Her word should be “evangelical”, the carrier of “good news” and should not be reduced to giving guidelines of moral evaluation, but should stimulate and accompany humanity that today as yesterday is on its way towards greater plenitude.

0. MORALS FOR THE NEW MILLENNIUM

If the voice of the Christian community aims at proposing also for today, an ethical way, she should pay attention to the “signs of the times” so as to give an adequate reply. If she wishes to answer the challenges that we have pointed out and to be the seed of the message of Jesus of Nazareth in the world, perhaps some of the inexcusable traits for Christian morals of the millennium, could be the following:

1. Morals that *listen* *

Morals that admit appeals coming from thousands of men and women that live and suffer.

These morals have to enter in serious dialogue with contemporary culture. A text of the last General Congregation of the Society of Jesus reminds us that: “...we must listen attentively even to those to whom the Gospel means nothing, and we should try to understand the cultural experience that lies behind what they say.

Do the things we do and say correspond to the real and urgent needs of those around us, in their relations with God and other people? If the answer is “no”, it means that we are not profoundly committed to the people we serve” (CG 34, NMC, n° 27,7).

Morals that before indulging in reflection and giving advice, get down to listening to men and women, irrespective of whether they are Christians or not. And like the rich young man, one should ask: “What good should I do...? Mt.19,16. We like to have recourse to this translation of the interconfessional Bible, since it places the stress on what we should do as Christians, not so much as to be good – it is not a question of personal perfection, as it has often been insisted – but for the benefit of our neighbour.

2. Morals in an attitude of sincere search

A search in union with all men and women of goodwill. Care should be taken to avoid hurry to search for easy and quick answers. Living with doubt and uncertainty should not be ruled out. Quite often, the Christian community has to express publicly its opinion on questions that affect all men and women, on new issues; but it should acknowledge that on many occasions, it cannot have the last word. It should always remind the world that the more vulnerable, the poorer and marginalised classes of society are the ones that need greater respect ...

* We will use the term *morals* in the sense of “moral theology” and the term *ethics* as “moral philosophy”

The Church, after many centuries, has to admit, as John Paul II proposed, that she was mistaken in many moral questions which she had affirmed in absolute terms, basing herself on data which were not theological, but for example, were more proper of science... at that concrete point in time. To admit this, to ask forgiveness, is a gesture that honours the Church and her humility will win her credibility.

3. Morals that *accompany people in the taking of decisions*

With a prophetic and critical component with respect to the attitudes and prevailing values of an unjust world lacking in solidarity in which we find ourselves immersed. This accompaniment should not abandon people who have taken decisions that may not have been correct or desirable. One should always keep in mind that there are difficult situations where people have to opt for the lesser evil or who are not fully free in their acts (see chapter 49). The Christian community should be hospitable and merciful towards all those people.

4. Morals that have been reflected upon *with the community in mind*

Reflected upon in humble prayer before God, who helps men and women to discern in the Spirit. Where the tasks of pastor and prophet are present in the community and where the community with its concerns and hopes are kept in mind. Morals that listen to the domestic churches (families) and small communities, where relations are more fraternal and where affection, gratuity, attention to the weakest, are converted into something more important than legal justice.

Morals that believe more in the Spirit present in our communities, that consider Christians in a more adult fashion, getting them to contribute their discerned and after-having-prayed-to-God opinion, which would then be subjected to the discernment of the whole Church. If it is accepted that in many issues, Christians are free and responsible and for which reason have the capacity to sin (move away from being faithful to the message of Jesus), they should also be considered free and responsible to contribute their moral discernment, on specific questions to the whole universal Church. Morals with the community in mind should invite active participation of women who have been greatly forgotten in this field, so much so that Christian ethics have been shaped by masculine sensitivity in which feminine sensitivity has not been taken into account.

5. Morals that *listen to the cry of the poor*

The cry of the oppressed of the earth, of those who have lost hope. Morals that listen to the cry of the enslaved people of Egypt, as God did, and that denounce as a result the new slaveries of our times. Morals that *are attentive to the more vulnerable classes* of our society, that defend cultural, linguistic, religious and immigrant minorities, nations with no land, the dispossessed, the refugees..., as also women who, in so many places, are deprived of education and culture, and are subjected to slave conditions. Morals that would be firmly committed, for example, to defending the rights of immigrants and to denouncing violations of these rights when they occur. Morals that attend to those society does not attach any value to, the physically and psychically disabled, those that have not yet been born or born with some important defect...

Morals where the “face of the other” is converted into an ethical appeal to which one must reply, over and above what is strictly right.ⁱ Morals that show that the Christian community is on the side of the weak and vulnerable and, therefore, should not fear showing itself weak and lacking in power, without resources, without privileges... That, in consequence, should not be afraid of making visible signs that show this willingness as, for example, renouncing its State, its bureaucratic organisation, going arm-in-arm in some countries with politicians and military figures... (since these are evident symbols of ambiguity, which indicate political and economic power in our society).

6. Prophetic morals

That do not express themselves in a pessimistic discourse focussed on what is evil and incorrect (denunciation), but in a discourse *that encourages people* to go in search of the good. Saint Paul reminds us that “where the Spirit is, there there is freedom” (2 Cor, 3).

Morals that not only denounce things that do not work, but also make *gestures (announcements) that break the silence* in which our society finds itself immersed. This silence, this mentality that considers that nothing can be done, that the economic, social, political system cannot be changed; this system can only break if prophetic signs are given that put alternative values in practice.

These signs can be put in existence by small human communities in which certain alternative values are lived. Communities that announce that it is possible to live in a different way. For example, co-operatives, fair commerce, goods in common, or the interchange of free services, political forms of participatory democracy... offer alternatives to an economy that generates injustice and social inequality.

We, Christians, must keep on creating alternative spaces that give testimony to the values we believe in. The work (moral norm, advice...) should give way to deeds, to lives that personify these values. In this way, we will present the Gospel of Jesus as a liberating experience for men and women of today.

Morals that acknowledge that the best way of expressing dissent about values that we do not agree to, is giving testimony of other values. We can speak in defence of immigrants, of their rights, make claims so that they do not lived marginalised... but are our Christian schools open to them?

In short, morals that point to values to be discovered as the source of a life in love and freedom.

7. Morals with a universal dimension

Keep in mind that to face certain issues that affect everybody, believers and non-believers, Christians must act in union with the whole of humanity. For example, it does not make sense to have one town or country taking measures to limit air or water contamination if their neighbours continue to contaminate, since water and air are common goods.

New technologies and progress have made us discover that, despite plurality and different ways of thinking, we still remain the same species sharing the same biosphere... Many are the issues that affect us as human beings and, therefore, it is necessary to look for global solutions and not ones that are limited to specifically determined territories.

To recover universal ethics, one could recover a traditional category of Catholic morals: the so-called *Moral Natural Law*. Understood as the existence of great ethical principles that all humans understand, whether they be believers or not, which constitute true human behaviour. These great principles can be discovered by means of a sincere search with the participation of everybody. And they can be represented in the *Declaration of Human Rights*. These morals would help to differentiate between *minimum human ethics* that are shared by all human beings and *maximum ethics* that we could live up to within our community.

Maximum ethics could be presented to non-believers as an invitation to a fully human and happy life, but we cannot impose these, nor aim that within a plural and democratic country these should be embodied in laws.

The Christian community will naturally suffer when it sees that some questions that it considers “minimum ethics” are not accepted in the dialogue, and, therefore, are not protected by the laws of some countries. This question will be discussed when we speak of disagreement within the dialogue.

Christian morals for the new millennium should seriously take up the challenge of “moral ecumenism”. Important steps have been made in this ecumenism; when the Parliament of the Religions of the World elaborated the *Declaration of World Ethics* (1993), it affirmed the existence of some “common minimum ethics” in all the main world religions.ⁱⁱ These minimum ethics can be used for creating world ethics which we have already commented upon earlier.

8. Necessity of establishing a *political moral code*

A political moral code that recovers the social dimension and faces the challenges of a globalised economy, unjust for two thirds of our world. Political morals that far from being unafraid of the new forms of participatory democracy foment them.

The survey that was conducted in Spain this year 2000, without any official backing, regarding the abolition of the external debt contracted by southern countries has been an example of how a participatory democracy could be fomented.

Likewise, morals that cease to be adapted only to the liberal-bourgeois and First World culture by allowing themselves to be deeply influenced by other cultures (Oriental, African...) will shed some of their individualistic, very little community-minded air... They could equally be influenced by Western sub-cultures, marginalised by official status (responsible and ecological consumption, ecologists, feminists, alternative movements, pacifists, radicals...), who question bourgeois individualism, “privatism” morals, private property, the form of plundering progress... Some of these “values” have been converted into the new idols of our times since they are no longer questioned by anybody.

9. Morals centred around the *human heart*

Because it is the place in which a person gives unity and meaning to his acts. It is where a person lives the deep relation with himself and the reality of others. The Gospel speaks to the heart of men and women about how the new man and woman should be, what attitudes they should adopt. It is in the heart where the new man and woman participate in the Spirit of Jesus.

Morals based on discernment and proceeding from a heart overflowing with the Spirit of Jesus. Basic attitudes of the life of a Christian are at play in this nucleus where God dwells.

The Christian in his personal and community ways, will assiduously acquire the habit of right living in his everyday behaviour. In this way we believe a more “pneumatological” moral code will be given birth to, in which “virtues” (habits towards Good) will acquire greater importance than norms, laws; and that these virtues will point out the values. Let us remember how St. Thomas had already centred his moral proposition on virtues.

Morals that centre around options and profound attitudes of people rather than on specific isolated acts will, we believe, be more in accordance with an integral anthropology and will help clarify the concept of sin.

However, it would be naive on our part if we were to overlook the fact that it is in these specific acts that the fundamental option for God is decided, and it is here where the moral life and the deep attitudes of the Christian are at stake.

Morals that allow themselves to be influenced by modern psychology so as to be in a position to understand better the human heart, especially in those aspects that can vary the responsibility of people in certain acts, since one must remember that Christian morals must be merciful. And only in this way, from a community angle, the seriousness of the Christian concept of sin can be recovered.

10. Morals that respect *human autonomy* understood as relational autonomy

We humans achieve self-fulfilment by relating ourselves with others and with God. The Christian ethical proposition is offered to all, because it is a humanising project for all of humanity, and as such, can be embraced by all. At the end, we will never tire of repeating it, the project of the Kingdom of God is, above all, a project of humanisation for all of humanity. So, the ethical aims of Christians, as we will see later, should be characterised by their rational plausibility. Every human being of goodwill should feel himself attracted to the Christian message, since he can capture these aims of humanisation.

11. Morals that try to be more *coherent*

That is to say, that deal with all the issues with the same yardstick of evaluation. For example, it should adopt, as many demand, the same attitude before unborn life (absolute condemnation of abortion) as before life that has been born (there still exists a certain justification of the death penalty, of war...). Morals that try to be coherent:

abstaining from evaluating certain questions, for example, those referring to sexual ethics from rigorous (deontological) stances and, on the other hand, in other questions, such as those referring to justice, economy, politics, accepting stances that require more nuances (adopting stances that are more teleological or consequential in moral terms).

We believe that all these characteristics can be resumed in *the need that exists for morals that respect autonomy and take into account the great importance of dialogue*. These, then, will be the points that we will develop in the following chapters.

2. AUTONOMOUS CROWNED-BY-FAITH-IN-CHRIST MORALS

We believe that Christian morals should be presented as autonomous morals. But what do we mean when we speak of *autonomy* in Christian morals. The integration of this concept in the field of morals has not been easy, since it could possibly give rise to some misunderstanding. Hence, it is often preferable to use the term *theonomy*, which is a “third way” between heteronomous morals (dictated from outside the person) and an autonomy understood as pure subjectivism or as exclusion of whatever postulate of faith. We believe that it would be preferable to speak of “moral pneumatology.

Whatever the term used, what we want to express can be resumed in the following points:

1. All men are able to capture the most human way of acting

In the first place, the premise that *any man or woman of goodwill can capture the most human way of acting.*

In this way, we are capable of interpreting reality which is predisposed and ordered to provide full humanisation. For Christians, the Spirit of God participates in this reality. It is in virtue of this assumption that Vatican Council II addressed not just believers but all men and women of goodwill. So, the Christian proposal is offered to the whole world, because it is about a humanising project for the whole of humanity and, as such, can be understood by all.ⁱⁱⁱ For this reason, the ethical targets of Christians, as we will see later, should be characterised by their rational plausibility. All human beings of goodwill should feel themselves attracted towards the Christian message, because their reason can capture the humanising content of the message in question. On the other hand, it is assumed that Christians must always be disposed to learn from all men and women, to grow in humanity. For this reason, we will insist later on the value of dialogue.

2. Faith does not contribute specifically Christian moral contents

In second place, *faith of believers does not contribute morals that are specifically Christian, incapable of being discovered by any man or woman of goodwill.*

This affirmation leads us to asking ourselves what does the Christian Faith contribute in the ethical plane. Faith, the believer’s experience, grants a new horizon of meaning, a new way of seeing things, a motivation, thanks to which it is possible to capture the destination which Christ came to give men and women. The Gospel, the Good News of Jesus, helps to mature deep-down behaviours and specific motivations (faith, love, gratuity...) This horizon of comprehension confers an effect of integration, criticism and stimulus on the values that are discovered autonomously.

This being so, the Christian community and Teaching Authority have a function with respect to the ethical norms developed autonomously. The Christian community,

by virtue of their hope in the ultimate end, should stimulate all authentically moral movements that take place in history. Despite the fact that the Church, all along history, has not always been a direct stimulus of moral values, many Christian ideas (like dignity, the value of equality between man and woman and among all men ...) have helped the conscience of humanity to progress; including sometimes through their secular opponents.

On the other hand, when Christians assume models of conduct of this world, they should put themselves under the discernment of the Word of God since, in spite of all the advances in moral conscience, man still remains subject to sin, error and the temptation of being enclosed in one's own self. In this way, the Church achieves an integrating function of *ethos* that is discovered by reason. Ethical reflection is not the monopoly of the Church, but is the responsibility of all men and women and so the Christian community should assume all the reflections that would lead it to greater human plenitude.

To affirm the non-specificity of the contents of Christian morals does not mean that from its beginnings the Christian community has not tried to orient itself in accordance with the behaviour and words of Jesus and has, therefore, been elaborating certain norms of ethical behaviour which would respond with fidelity to Jesus to the new situations that have been arising.

And so we can speak of "*Christian ethics*"^{iv} of the community. But these "*ethics*" are not exclusive since their peculiarity is not to be found in particular normative propositions, but in the global attitude based on faith, in a new interpretative horizon of the distinct norms of behaviour. The constant remembrance of what God has done and is doing for mankind through Christ indicates the fundamental motive of the life of Christians.

This remembrance demands of men a conversion, a fundamental option that determines the root of all Christian existence. It is the option produced by God in man. The answer corresponds to man but is produced by the presence of God. This fundamental option, as a transcendental ethical act, should be translated into all private acts. The authentic motive of acting is the love that is shown by God and experienced by man, this love being the orienting force of the fundamental option.

We do not deny that from the message of Jesus emanates an anthropology that leads to a definite kind of ethics - the Christian ethics. But what we do affirm is that this anthropology, as it represents the plenitude of the human being, can be discovered by all men and women of goodwill. Let us remember the Christological affirmation that says Christ is the plenitude of being of men and women, and for this reason it can be affirmed that in His resurrection, eschatology has entered human history. From the stance of Christian faith, we can affirm that this is the case because we are all children of God, and the Spirit of God does not remain confined only to the Christian community.

Some Christians criticise this approach because it seems to devaluate Christian specificity. They affirm, moreover, that there exist values specifically and exclusively Christian: The value of martyrdom, celibacy, love of one's enemies... But these values

are also shared by other cultures; and, besides, if they were not human values, neither would they be Christian, because to be a Christian is the Utopia of being fully human.

The problem is not so much of content as everybody is capable of knowing very well what values are to be respected. What very often is lacking is the strength, the motivation to carry out these values. Perhaps this was the experience of St. Paul, who contrasted the regime of sin to that of the Spirit when he said: "... because I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not desire" (Rom. 7, 19). From this arises the importance of the Christian community, the importance of the presence of the Spirit and the testimony of Saints within the community, living as they do more profoundly the message of Jesus. The Spirit can act where It wants, but while we maintain ourselves faithful to Jesus, It has Its dwelling permanently within the Christian community.

3. Loss of the sense of duty and responsibility

Thirdly, we must keep in mind that the current problem does not lie in the confrontation between autonomy and heteronomy, but in the *loss of the sense of duty and responsibility*.

Let us remember the recent assassination of children committed by their mothers or among adolescent friends, that have roused the conscience of the country. Harmonisation between autonomy and the sense of duty is had when firstly one keeps in mind that the human being is in the process of making and secondly, the fact of gratuity of our reply to the appeals of our neighbour.

As we have already said, autonomy should be understood in an inter-relational way and as an autonomy that keeps very much in mind the challenge of an objectivity in morals: not everything matters the same.

3. MORALS IN DIALOGUE

A lot is said about dialogue as the human way of resolving conflicts. But a deeper analysis as to how dialogues are conducted in our society tells us that often these are converted into a refined way of starting a battle in which one imposes his ideas on the other. Let us observe, for example, many of the debates between politicians of our country during the electoral campaigns.

Our western society prefers the aesthetics of dialogue to that of violence but still follows the same logic. Often dialogue is converted into an instrument by which strong and dominating people impose their ideas on the rest. If dialogues were truly a *dialogos*, in the original sense of the term, they should demand in the first place that they be symmetrical, that is to say, there should be a footing of equality among all its participants, which would allow truth to come to light on the strength of the arguments put forward.

In most dialogues what appears important is not that we get nearer the truth but that the truth that one holds as valid, triumphs. Neither are we really concerned about the prevalence of the conditions of true symmetry in dialogue, since asymmetry permits our arguments to win not on their own strength but because of the frailty of our opponents.

The conditions of the way in which a true dialogue should be developed have been proposed by the so-called *dialogical ethics* of J. Habermas and K.O. Apel. This ethical proposition is purely “procedural”, where the basis of all norms lies in their being made legitimate by consensus. A good man or woman just because he is good is not necessarily a happy person nor one who is subject to his own law but is a person who, in situations of conflict, is disposed to resolve them through dialogue that aims at reaching a consensus. This dialogue should fulfil a series of conditions; some purely logical and others clearly ethical.^v

1. Theological value of dialogue

The word *dialogue* cannot be reduced to a purely secular terminology as it has a religious dimension that we must know. Let us remember the words of the Encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* Of Paul VI: “We will give this interior impulse of charity that tends to convert itself into an external gift, the name, commonly known today as dialogue” (n° 76). These words should deeply affect us, since they indicate to us that charity, love, as God’s gift to man, receives the name of dialogue when it opens itself out to other men. Dialogue is a form of loving others. This dialogue should be conducted with all men and women of goodwill, since “nobody is alien to their heart. Nobody is indifferent to them in their ministry. Nobody is an enemy, if the person himself does not want to be one” (n° 110).

It is worthwhile knowing too the words of John Paul II with respect to dialogue among different religions: “By dialogue, we make God to be present among us; when we open ourselves out to dialogue with the rest, we open ourselves out to God.”^{vi}

The history of God with us is the history of a loving dialogue between God and men. The initiative is taken by God, but this dialogue is not a one-way street since God enters a true dialogue of interchange. Let us remember the way God allows Himself to be influenced by men and women. God listens and not only talks to us. God not only converts Himself into the Word and men into His hearers, but also acts as an interlocutor who allows Himself to be affected by the vicissitudes of men and women. God hears the cry of His people who suffer slavery in Egypt (Ex.2, 23-24). When God enters into dialogue, He even goes to the extent of modifying His plans when faced with human appeals. Abraham, for example, forces a change in the plan of God Who wished to destroy Sodom; he even bargains with God (Gn.18, 16-33). And so, the Christian God is turned into a truly dialoguing God. The love of God converts men into interlocutors on a true plane of equality with Him. “I no longer call you servants... but friends” (John 15,15). the history of God who dialogues teaches us how we must dialogue among men and women as a way of loving one another.

Dialogue, therefore, forms part of the way of being of our God. We men and women can pray to God, since he is a “dialoguing” God. To make this possible, God prepares the meeting-place with Him. He is God’s Spirit in us, who permits us to convert ourselves into interlocutors on a plane of equality with God.

Another aspect to be kept in mind in the search of a dialogued Christian ethics is the consideration that the Gospels in their origin were actually a dialogue between the message of Jesus and the manner in which this message was lived in a specific community with a specific culture. The Gospels, therefore, are an invitation to dialogue.; in other words, they invite people to embark upon a dynamic process between the proposal of Jesus adapted to the culture of those times and the culture of our day. This process of dialogue, of cultural adaptation is already an evangelical act since it transmits a way of understanding dialogue, a form of loving, of knowing how to place oneself on the side of the other (whether the other happens to be a person or a culture different from our own).

It is not surprising, then, that John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, wrote:

“Among the different services that the Church must offer humanity, there is one, for which she is especially responsible: the diaconate of the truth. On the one hand, this mission makes the practising Christian community participate in the common effort that is being carried out by humanity to achieve truth, and on the other hand, it obliges the community to take responsibility for the announcement of certain acquired certitudes, although it is aware that all obtained truth is only a stage towards that total truth which will manifest itself in the last revelation of God” (encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, n° 2).

2. Characteristics of a “Christian” dialogue

Let us turn now to describing the characteristics that our dialogues should have, viewed from the paradigm of a dialogue between God and human beings. The dialogue

should be presided over by the desire of each interlocutor to present himself to the other as he is; he presents his whole existence, experience, knowledge. The words of one is placed next to the words of the other on a footing of equality among the interlocutors.

The words of both sides should meet to pursue the search for truth, through an objective analysis of the problem in question. To this end, the two interlocutors should be sincere with themselves, know the subjective ingredient of their words and accept the fact that the truth will arise in a process of convergence between words from both parties. To converge does not mean to dominate, rather it means to draw ever nearer to the truth, each party yielding a bit from their initial positions, purifying them or making them fuller.

The first step towards convergence is shown in the *capacity to listen*, the capacity to understand the other through the eyes of the other.^{vii} Listening means wanting to be in communion with the other party, to welcome his words as they are, without manipulating them to one's own convenience.

This capacity to listen, to want to converge towards the truth, should be presided over by love for the other. To love difference is to be ready to give one's life for the one who defends difference. This dialogue, as a way of loving the other, sees in the other person a possible *brother*, and not an *enemy* who could cause harm. To learn to dialogue is to learn to appreciate difference as the source of enrichment, of growth in the process of the search for truth.

To enter this dialogue is to enter a logic of communion in which human relations are free and freeing and is opposed to the logic of possession.

The Christian from this perspective enters in dialogue, conscious of the fact that he does not possess the truth in its plenitude, and that all dialogue requires one to get out of oneself and for this reason requires a certain apprenticeship. It is only by dialogue that one learns to love the other. The fears we have when entering a dialogue are the fears we have of losing our own certitudes since we find ourselves comfortable and satisfied within our ecclesiastical culture. So, the faith of Abraham is needed to depart for the "foreign land" and to know that God "can raise children of Abraham from stones".

The Christian is called to begin the dialogue with these qualities that we have enumerated, even though his interlocutor starts off in an attitude of dominance and manipulation. One must enter with love which is capable of giving confidence to the other and making him abandon his defence mechanisms and enter in dialogue. As D. Rahner says:

"A Christian will go about his dialogue with the seriousness of one who knows the danger that the fault of his pride, stubbornness, false self-confidence and violence can play in perverting this dialogue and turning it into a social lie; he knows that he himself is a sinner, and on this account contributes his own share in the dialogue under the judgement and mercy of God (...). A Christian knows that love alone is the supreme light of knowledge and that, in respect of dialogue, the words of St. Paul are very appropriate: If I should speak the languages of men and angels, but do not have charity, I am like sounding brass and tinkling cymbals (1Cor. 13,1)".^{viii}

The authority of dialogue is, according to the encyclical *Ecclesiam suam*, “... intrinsic on account of the truth it puts forward, the charity it spreads around, the example it sets” (n° 95).

On the other hand, when a dialogue is initiated, it is convenient that it should not be presided over by an urgency to reach agreements motivated by a pragmatic mentality, even though at times one may have to look out for provisional forms of agreement to meet the urgent needs of the situation.

Personal human life and life in community are built from this dialogue, from the communication between men and women. We, humans, right from our birth and in the first contact with our mother, are beings open to the word that comes to us from the outside and which forms and builds us. Our instinctive indeterminateness makes us open to receiving things from the outside world which turns us into cultural beings who have to learn and keep on forming ourselves. Our whole life is a continuous approach to the truth through a dialogue with the whole of reality.

3. Conditions of dialogue

Dialogue, however, as we propose, is not a merely intentional or “metaphysical” question. On the contrary, it implies certain very specific human and social conditions. Dialogue is opposed to all sorts of violence and requires that all people can be interlocutors. It rejects the logic of dominance or violence and so requires that certain conditions be given that would make this possible. Consequently, it presupposes creating previously the conditions of equality among the interlocutors. So, ethics based on dialogue requires a social reform so that all, including those who live in the Third World, can really participate in it. If this is not achieved, then ethics will only be applicable to the First World, and will only serve to justify the maintenance of inequalities that the First World has provoked between the Third World and itself.

Dialogue cannot be reduced to aesthetics but it should make viable the conditions that could make it possible. As a philosopher critical of “dialogical ethics” says:

“... it is necessary that prophets should rise again, those who opt from the start for the south, putting aside the arrogance of logo-centred reason that only concedes recognition to the “loqui-capable” and who silence those who do not even have a voice. A logic of utopian and prophetic moral action is necessary, (...). As the rabbit said to the lion, we too say: show us your will to dialogue by putting aside the arrogance of your claws and the savagery of your teeth...”^{ix}

So then, this ethics is not void of prophetic content, if it is really considered to its last consequences. But it is not easy for ethics to be applicable in situations of violence, generalised injustice, where earlier conditions should be created to establish dialogue, perhaps, even with a certain dose of “violence”.

4. Dialogue and disagreement

The culture of dialogue should permit disagreement too; but this should be expressed without violence. Thus, dissent should be expressed in categories of tolerance and testimony. Testimony will always be the form of making other men and

women understand the values of certain practices or ways of acting quite characteristic of Christians.

In history those who have made humanity progress have always been people who have broken social consensus. Prophets have always been people of this nature and this has led them to clash with the *status quo* who have often reacted eliminating them. Ideas of prophets are enduring and in the end assert themselves. Later generations recover the figure of the prophet and even make a myth of him or turn him into a saint. It is precisely these prophets who can make dialogue progress in the dialogical process such that it never stops. For example, if nobody had broken the consensus, slavery would have been accepted by Christians even today. But unlike what has happened all along history, these break-ups of consensus should be achieved not by strength and power, at least not on the part of Christians, but by testimony.

Jesus of Nazareth broke religious consensus through testimony, using as tools service and weakness and not strength and power. His example has been followed by many prophets who have chosen to denounce injustices by service and non-violence. “The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve” (Mark 10, 45); “Just as God sent Him to persuade, not force us, since violence is not given in God” (Letter to Diogneto VII, 4 of the II century).

Love that Jesus asks of us for our neighbour implies that we must incarnate in a coherent way in our own lives the values we profess and it is only in this way that these values will be seen and appreciated as values and not as impositions. Dialogue, example and service are more adequate forms for expressing love for one’s neighbour in our world. So, for example, a community, like the Christian one, that does not accept abortion should shelter and help mothers without resources, unmarried mothers to maintain children with some handicap and should help in family planning... to show that human life is valuable from the moment of conception (as the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, n° 88 exhorts us to do).

Dialogue could mean that one may have at times to accept not reaching agreement on a point where one sees clearly that an important value is at stake. Dialogue between God and man has also implied a progressive and pedagogical journey during which humanity has been/is slowly learning to be more fully human. From the formulation of “Thou shall not kill” of the Ten Commandments, we have been learning to respect the value of life: the biblical formula “Thou shall not kill” at first only referred to not killing another person of his own tribe till it meant not killing anybody. In a similar way, many questions have been studied in depth, as for instance the illicitness of torture or of capital punishment that was accepted for a long period of time, and is now totally rejected.

5. Dialogue within the Church

On another plane, the Christian community, the Church, through dialogue with the whole world, has turned herself into a “community of dialogue”. Ecclesial communion is to be had where true dialogue exists. Let us remember the words of *Ecclesiam Suam*: “The Church should direct her steps towards dialogue with the world in which she lives. The Church should become word, message, dialogue” (n° 77).

So, the acceptance of dialogue supposes, on an intra-ecclesial plane, a community presided over by a communion. Then and only then will testimony be given of a new way of understanding dialogue in a world in which dialogue has so often been manipulated. The Christian community in her internal life, should be presided over by a loving dialogue that is capable of loving those who do not think in the same way,^x a dialogue in which ethical values are shown and communicated instead of being imposed.

A community that sincerely believes in dialogue, must also have faith in the presence of the Spirit in all the realities of the world; in other words, must see the world not only impregnated with sin but also full of the Holy Spirit.

Certain discourses, heard in the Church, even from her Teaching Body, view things in a catastrophic light and excessively underline the negative aspect of modern society. Without denying that these could correspond to reality, they implicitly show a Church that regards the world with fear and that does not appreciate the good things that the world has autonomously found.

We need a Church that has more faith in the Holy Spirit and in whom it will be necessary to elaborate a new more pneumatological ecclesiology. In this aspect a true ecumenism with the oriental Orthodox Churches would turn out very enriching.

6. Dialogue with Discernment

The life of a Christian lies between “Yes already” and “Not yet”. It is in this life that we live our moral life and achieve ourselves through our actions. Morals, therefore, should always maintain this “eschatological tension”. A Christian is encouraged for this reason to learn to discern. So discernment is converted into the most important category of morals. It could be defined as the capacity to evaluate all circumstances in accordance with the Gospel, the Good News of the Kingdom of God.

This category of discernment corresponds to the time of the Spirit. The Christian community is capable of reading the signs of the times according to the Spirit, in prayer to discern what are the attitudes, actions that are more in keeping with the Gospel of Jesus.

In other words, this is the time of creativity in the Spirit, since only the community or the person faithful to this Spirit is capable of discerning adequately in new situations which way to choose. With the words of St. Paul: “... allow oneself to be transformed by the new mentality...” (Rom. 12,2); “Do not suffocate the Spirit, nor despise the gifts of prophecy. Examine everything and retain what is good” (1Te 5, 19-20). B. Häring very rightly said the most authentic and efficacious Teaching of the Church is that exercised by saints and martyrs.^{xi}

Discernment in prayer represents the “theological place” in which the reason of the believer or of the community (a full reason illuminated by the Spirit) selects the behaviours most in accordance with the radicality of the message of Jesus. This discernment is achieved in two big stages. The first stage, which we have referred to mainly, is reached when the Christian community, in prayer, looks for moral orientation before the new challenges. For example, to determine if the use of transgenetics in

agriculture is in line with human well-being (of all humans or for the benefit of a few multinational companies alone) and the well-being or no of the biosphere (does it respect bio-diversity?). In this way moral norms are enunciated that show values to be taken into account. But discernment can also be given in the individual conscience.

As an indispensable help for moral evaluation, discernment must also listen, where moral questions are concerned, to the reading that science (biology, sociology...) makes of reality. Let us remember that in the history of morals, the culture and science of the times have always played their part in morals.^{xiii}

Christian morals, therefore, instead of being so close to Law, as has occurred up to Vatican Council II, must become inseparably united to spirituality. It is necessary to emphasise this idea, at a time like ours, in which before the moral relativism prevalent in our society, the Church can easily slip into the legalistic temptation. A “good moralist” should be a mystic. The community, in an attitude of prayer and adoration, must discern those values that humanise more; in other words, that divinise us, that bring us nearer to the Kingdom of God.

Concluding with the words of St. Paul: “And what I ask in my prayer is that your love keeps on steadily growing in perfect knowledge and clear thinking, so that you may discern what is best to be pure and without stain for the day of Christ’s coming” (Phil.1,9-10). Thus, secular dissociation between spirituality and Christian morals will be dissolved.

7. Conclusion about dialogue

Let us conclude saying that we, Christians, must regard dialogue as a form of love for others, a form of being present and of having historical efficacy within our pluralistic society. We should be critical about the ways dialogues are conducted in our society so that we demand authentic dialogues and not mere aesthetic guises of war where power and/or economic strength are who win. God in whom we believe has been a God who has been making progress in us as a community through permanent dialogue in community prayer. And our community, if it is truly a nucleus of love and communion, should be a sphere in which true and sincere dialogue prevails among all the members of its different ministries and charismas.

If we demand of non-believers our presence as Christians in the dialogues that take place in our society and we demand likewise that these dialogues be sincere and true, then we must give good example by fully practising a dialogue within our community. The Church is a true sacrament of Christ when she converts herself into a community of love, and this love is translated into the capacity of knowing how to dialogue.

Jesus has taught us to love, to give our lives for others. When we express the truth of the Christian God as being a Trinity, a community of love, we are not far from affirming that our God is “dialogical”. The Trinitarian God is at the same time Father, Son and Holy Spirit. A God who is a veritable community. God is love, and as such cannot be a solitary God. If He were so, He would not be love. The Father who is the source of love, needs to communicate it and the Son is the receiver of this love. He welcomes the love that comes from the Father and makes it His own. And, as the Son is

also love, He does not reserve it for Himself but returns it lovingly to the Father. From this interchange of giving and receiving, receiving and giving rises the Holy Spirit. In this way, the Spirit rises from “dialogue” in the intimacy of the Father and Son.

4. OLD AND NEW CHALLENGES FOR CHRISTIAN MORALS

Christian morals stem from the assumption of a project: the construction of the Kingdom of God by the following of Jesus. They reject, therefore, the arbitrariness of regarding all ways of acting as having the same validity, since some actions are in line with the construction of the Kingdom of God while other actions take us away from Him.

In a world in which tolerance is often misunderstood as the acceptance of “anything”, we, Christians, affirm that there exist objective moral principles that humanise us and are in line with the Project of God.

1. The challenge of objective (moral) knowledge

What man does is not indifferent: dialoguing is not the same as manipulating, working is not the same as exploiting, etc. A “manner of being a man” is implied in all that man does, in all his decisions and this manner leads to a more human or a more inhuman world. There must exist, therefore, certain ethical principles that have value by themselves.

Besides the existence of these values and principles, morals suppose the possibility of knowing these great ethical truths or, at least, of allowing us to get nearer them.

For Christians the access to these truths that make us more human is not cognitive alone but, above all, “praxic” (to live, love others, love Jesus). Human beings progress ethically not only by reflection but also by their free options and experience. We affirm the presence of the Spirit of Jesus within the Christian community Who keeps on showing us these truths in the discourse of history. We Christians, therefore, though not in exclusivity, have a privileged access to the truth through the gift of Revelation. Revelation, the way of life of Jesus of Nazareth, contrasted with reality, has shaped a style of behaviour (an “ethos”) within the Christian community. This “ethos” appears when this community, with the aid of the Spirit, have discerned what attitudes and actions enhance their fidelity to the message of Jesus of Nazareth.

Thus, Christian ethics always claims a certain *objectivity*. Moral behaviour aims at following some principles that have their “own solidity”: solidarity, human life and happiness, respect for others, etc., are values that are proper of the human being, independently of whether one acknowledges them or not.

In opposition to this way of understanding access to truth, Post-modernity affirms the impossibility of gaining access to truth. For this reason, a whole series of ethics of an “emotivist”^{xiii}, “decisionist” etc. nature have appeared denying the existence of great universal ethical principles that all human beings can share.

In our world, evaluation of individuality and subjectivity has led many to deny any objectivity at all; so morals would depend only on purely *subjective* options. This, if taken to the last consequences, would impede any serious ethical consideration: with what authority can one question the behaviour of someone, if *objective* values do not exist (valid for everybody) in the world we live?

Now this objectivity that appears quite clear in the case of big principles (e.g. “Thou shall not kill”) is obliged to live in inevitable tension with its day to day materialisations in the “here and now”. Christians have always searched for ways how to be more faithful to the message of Jesus in the specific situations they daily find themselves in. The principle says: “Thou shall not kill”; but what does this ethical imperative imply? Can one kill in self defence, in war... The early Christians, for example, had to discern if they could serve in the Roman military service, since this service obliged them to kill and to attend ceremonies where pagan gods were adored.

Great ethical truths demand that they be defined in order to have historical efficacy. However, a definition does not reflect the truth in all its dimensions. The display of humanisation is precarious, since we are limited, subject to space and time, and, in addition, sinners. We will find the plenitude of the Kingdom in the eschatological times as a gift of God; so all approximation to this plenitude will be partial and always capable of improvement. We find ourselves, thus, on the way, called to the plenitude of humanity.

2. The challenge of historicity

The theological discourse in morals should fully assume the dynamic quality of man. Man is a historical being, that is one in the making. Moral theology should regard the absolute of moral truths as objectivity of what is real, and not as *immutability* (impossibility of change in the course of time). Expressed in another way, it should assume human historicity on the plane of moral reflection.

It is necessary to start from the affirmation that it is within human capacity to know the truth and attain objectivity of what is real. In other words, we must start from an anthropology that assumes man to be an *incomplete* being, who finds on the way what he needs to become complete. An anthropology that accepts, besides, that man keeps on building himself in his meeting with reality, in his confrontation with the concrete and specific. Only in his behaviour, at times incorrect, does man keep on capturing how he should behave, in what direction he should go to reach full self-achievement.

So reality is not finished, finalised, but is on the way towards plenitude. The truth of reality is the aspect, announced in reality itself, of not being complete yet but called to plenitude. This contrast which exists in reality between what is and its potential is perceived by man as a moral impulse.^{xiv}

All along history, we have been discovering for example what it means “not to kill”, “to turn the other cheek”; we have passed through periods in which certain practices have been justified which today we consider beyond doubt are contrary to the message of Jesus and even contrary to universal human rights.

Morals, therefore, are not made “once and for all”, but participate in the historicity of all that is human.

3. The Challenge of “participation”

We find ourselves in a world where, despite the deficiency of the political model of western democracy, the democratic mentality is fully present, that is to say, participation exists in the different levels of social life. This mentality should be capable of translating itself in the sphere of the Christian community and in the sphere of moral reflection. Of course, we are not inferring by this that the great moral principles that indicate and express moral values are to be agreed upon within the Christian community as though we ourselves were the creators of what is good and evil. This was the temptation of the first human beings, expressed in the book of Genesis and repeated all along the history of humanity and leading to so many inhuman acts.

But the reflection on whether certain new techniques (let us think about cloning, genetic engineering ...) are in line or not with greater humanisation, should be conducted within the Christian community with the participation of all. The great ethical principles are reflected in the anthropology that Jesus proposes and in the experience of the early communities, but they do not say anything about how they are to be applied to new topics. For example, in the Ten Commandments we do not come across “Thou shall not clone”; on the other hand, we have “Thou shall not kill”, though in the name of God people have been killed (capital punishment and the killing of heretics have been justified).

In this respect regarding the Church more as a community and less as a hierarchical model in accordance with the proposal of *Vatican Council II*, should have repercussions in the manner of conceiving how moral reflection should be elaborated within the Christian community. A model that conceives the role of the hierarchy on the margin of community life and on the margin of the various charismas that are to be found in community life, would be inadequate. A model that still considers lay people or women on an inferior plane to those who have ministries within the Church, would also be inadequate.

When we ask ourselves if something is good for men and women, all moral reflection, in our opinion, supposes in the first place the reading of reality, the understanding of what values are at stake, etc. and, as a result, requires the participation of all who have something to say in the matter. This participation is very important in order that the various sensitivities prevalent within the Church can contribute their reflection. For example, in order to evaluate morally certain techniques of genetic engineering, it seems indispensable that the voice of doctors and experts in genetics are listened to.

4. The challenge of human “autonomy

We find ourselves in a society which highly values human autonomy. Without adopting a conception of an exaggeratedly individualistic human autonomy, devoid of any interpersonal aspect, Christian morals should be presented as “autonomous”, “adult” morals. The problem would be how Christians should understand this

“autonomy” (we may even ask the question whether it is necessary to maintain this term).

What is clear is that Christian morals cannot be put forward with *heteronomous* traits: morals imposed “from the outside”, as a law that is accepted on account of pure respect for authority, irrespective of its content. God wishes all that is good for man; so Christian moral reflection cannot in the first place set forth arguments that are purely theological (that can be understood as heteronomous), without giving reasons why the behaviour is human or inhuman, evil or good for men and women. Instead of saying “This has to be done (or should not be done) because God wants it this way”, it should be said “God wants this to be done (or avoided) because it is good”.

Christian morals, in their general principles, aims at being *morals of full humanisation*, and, consequently, are capable of being understood by any human being of goodwill. For this reason, when dialoguing with non-believers, one cannot put forward arguments of a heteronomous nature which perhaps could only be understood within the Christian community. Arguments on the other hand that are considered to lead to full humanisation will more readily be listened to. For example, arguments of the Teaching Authority of the Church regarding euthanasia cannot easily be understood by non-believers because of their theological nature, which can be considered excessively heteronomous. For instance: “God is the Lord of life and we have no power to dispose of it” is an argument that can be appreciated by a believer; but what force has it for an agnostic?

5. The challenge of a global humanity

Within our society, numerous voices are raised requesting global answers to diverse problems that we suffer as the human race (ecological, bio-ethical, relating to the distribution of resources...). It is, therefore, necessary to look for agreements in these questions among all men and women of the planet, irrespective of creed and conviction. For example, now that everybody speaks of the debt of Third World countries, I would like to point out the not-so-well-known “ecological debt” that countries of the First World contracted when they industrialised themselves and progressed economically with a very high ecological cost for the whole planet..., and now demand that countries of the Second or Third World get developed in a clean and non-contaminating way!

A “world-wide economic solidarity” is necessary to resolve this problem. Before matters of world-wide reach, solutions of world-wide reach are needed. More than ever, ethical principles on a planetary level are necessary and in their elaboration, Christian tradition has a very qualified role to play.

6. The challenge of “critical situations”

It is becoming increasingly frequent for people to find themselves in situations “poisoned by structural sin” where the only possible way out is to opt for the “lesser evil”. In some concrete situations, opting for the good requires heroism that surpasses the strength of most people. In situations such as these, “rigouristic” morals offer little or no solution (since the ideal is almost impossible to fulfil), and does nothing other than take people away from the love and mercy of God. In these critical situations, it is

acceptable to opt for the “lesser evil” or for “graduality” - a gradual progression, i.e. tending towards the ideal good but accepting intermediate steps that are considered “lesser evils”.^{xv} This setting out towards the good implies already that one is on the road to Salvation.

7. In what way has the Church been affected by these challenges

The challenges we have just seen have been received in different ways by the Teaching Authority of the Church. Let us briefly see now what this reaction has been.

Vatican Council II

Vatican Council II represented a spirit of dialogue with the world of modernity. From the council emanated a full acceptance of religious freedom and conscience. As also the hope that, despite the fact that all human beings do not share the same faith, we could share the same morals in the face of the challenges arising in the new world. In the same way, the Church, in its capacity as depository of the Word of God, acknowledged that she did not have answers to all the questions raised in today’s world and that these could be sought among all men through dialogue. So, the Church could be enriched by the contributions of all and share in the common task of moving towards a more human society.

“The Church that keeps the deposit of the word of God, from which are deduced the principles of religious and moral order, in spite of the fact that she does not have an answer ready for each question, desires to unite the light of revelation to the skill of all, in order that the way be illuminated along which humanity has just set out” (GS, n° 33).

“The Church, whilst totally rejecting atheism, sincerely professes that all people, whether believers or not, should contribute in the accurate construction of this world in which all live, and this is impossible without an authentic and prudent dialogue” (GS, n° 21)^{xvi}.

Through dialogue, the Church shows her solidarity with the whole human family, and demonstrates her love towards it by bringing it the light of the Gospel^{xvii}. To this end, the Church should be prepared to start listening with the help of the Holy Spirit, and to discern the different voices of our times to be able to evaluate them in the light of the divine Word^{xviii}.

The Council seems to encourage Christians to see the world with new eyes so that they perceive not only the negative aspects but are also convinced that the Spirit acts too in the different realities that constitute our world.

The Council manifests that Christianity wishes to offer to all men and women her beliefs about the human being in order that in union we can all seek the good of humanity in concrete questions. Acknowledging that she does not always have answers to all the new questions that are raised, she offers herself in the firm belief that the light of faith could help in the search for these answers. This desire of dialogue is established on different levels, intra-ecclesial (the existence in fact of an intra-ecclesial^{xix} plurality is thereby accepted), and among all men and women (GS n° 92).

The acceptance of dialogue should logically suppose that one is prepared to allow oneself to be taught in humanity and also to learn to correct one's own errors. So one cannot enter dialogue with the conviction that one already has the definitive word regarding a specific question. An encyclical that represents a positive vision of dialogue is *Ecclesiam Suam*, of Paul VI.

Before Postmodernity

With the abrupt entry of postmodernity, the Teaching Authority of the Church has acquired a harder and more worrying tone. This can be noticed in the Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* or in the Pastoral Instruction of Spanish bishops *La Verdad os hará libres*.

Postmodernity has caused a crisis not only to our Faith - something modernity had already done - but also to our reason. According to postmodernity moral principles lie in the arbitrariness of each individual.

As we have already said, there have appeared "decisionist", "emotivist" ethics where preference and/or sentiment is converted into an ethical reference, doing away thereby with the universalism of ethics. The loss of objective, universal references often leads to ethics in which strong people impose themselves and the weak suffer, where savage economic imperialism reigns... Often the economically strong follow an ethics that is (more or less) Christian in individual matters, but in questions of a social nature, follow no ethic principle whatever other than pure egoism and the exploitation of others.

A global reading of *Veritatis Splendor* allows us to see how an answer is given to the challenges of ethical living in our post-modern society. The Encyclical stresses the evangelical vision of morals for believers, while it tries for non-believers to recover the rationality of morals appealing to a formulation half-forgotten by Vatican Council II - the *Natural Law*.

The Encyclical, finding itself faced with pure subjectivism, stresses unilaterally the objectivity of moral truth. And so, before the big dialectical questions of fundamental morals (as for example: objective order, or law versus subjective conscience) it prefers the first part of the binomial.

The Encyclical also gives attention to the objective analysis of the isolated moral act in order to stress the fact that good intentions and good faith alone are not sufficient. By these observations, the encyclical rejects the increasing relativism in the field of morals. While accepting that in the present situation it is necessary to stress the objective, non-relativist aspect, we must not forget that Christian morals should always maintain an equilibrium between the two aspects: objectivity and subjectivity.

The Encyclical does not consider the complex situations in which some main values could enter in conflict among themselves. However, practical life very often presents this type of conflicts between different important values. In these cases, considerations should be introduced which could help resolve them.

It would not be just to appeal to the Encyclical and slip into legalistic fundamentalisms that resolve nothing, since they give no answer to complex moral situations that take place in reality, and as a result in the long term are the seed of greater relativism and subjectivism.

Christians should remember that we possess great moral truths but, as we have said before, we have to apply them to the realities of “here and now” amidst a complex situation of values that must be taken into account.

In this respect, Thomas of Aquinas reminds us of something that could have full relevance today: the farther we separate ourselves from the big principles of Natural Law (that is to say, of the objective and universal ethical reference) the greater will be the differences between the different concrete forms of these big principles (St. Th. I-II, q. 94 .4).

The discredit of moral reflection arises when led by an excess of objectivity and fear of freedom, we try to over-ensure all moral situations by means of norms, saving thereby the work of personal conscience and the work of conscience of the Christian community. The latter, before the new situations in which we are placed by scientific and technological progress, does not have any immediate answer available; in these cases we must discern and perhaps take provisional stands, faced as we are with a lack of data and the uncertainty of data brought forward by science.

The same Encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* calls for *creativity* in morals: “... the moral life demands *creativity* and inventiveness characteristic of the human person, origin and cause of his deliberate acts” (n° 40); “Moral prescriptions (...) must be faithfully taken care of and *permanently brought up-to-date* all along history, in different cultures” (n° 25).

We believe that an attitude of humility is not contrary to moral firmness; rather it confers credibility in the present day world. The Christian moral project, if it is that of Jesus of Nazareth, represents human plenitude and, therefore, can be offered as a good for all men and women. And although one assumes that the structural sin threatens our present day culture, we cannot simply throw the whole blame on this sin when a concrete moral truth is not understood as reasonable or capable of generating true humanisation.

Christian fundamental morals for the new millennium must recover the intuitions of Vatican Council II, and at the same time keep very much in mind the warnings of *Veritatis Splendor*.

Epilogue

We end with the words attributed to St. Augustine and repeated by some moralists since they have much relevance today for morals of the new millennium: “In necessariis, unitas; in dubiis, libertas; in omnibus, caritas”.^{xx}

To be able to follow these words in the field of Christian morals, we need a Christian community that fully believes in the presence of the Spirit of Jesus of Nazareth in our world. A community that tolerates diversity based on love and sincere,

honest dialogue and who are conscious of being on the road towards the plenitude of the Kingdom of God.

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WORK IN GROUPS

1. Choose two characteristics of Christian morals for the new millennium (Ch. 1) that you consider more important or pressing. Justify your choice.

The choice of each one can be discussed in groups and an attempt to reach a consensus as to which characteristics are the most important.

2. On pg. 11 we read “the faith of believers does not contribute morals that are specifically Christian, incapable of being discovered by any man or woman of goodwill”.

- *Do you agree to this statement? Why?*
- *What does the Christian faith contribute in the sphere of morals?*

3. Ch. 3 speaks of dialogue in morals, of its characteristics and conditions. Try to make a list of these “characteristics and conditions” proper of an authentic dialogue. In your opinion:

- *What factors can facilitate authenticity in dialogue?*

4. The Church always defends a certain “objectivity” in morals.

- *Why do you think she has done this?*
- *Do you think the question is important?*

5. The ethics of maxims is a project of happiness that we offer other people (pg. 8).

- *What language, what ways should we use to make our Christian proposal more comprehensible and motivating?*

6. “Among the characteristics for a “Christian” dialogue, the author points out sincerity, authenticity, love for our neighbour...” (pg. 16).

- *In our personal, social and political conflicts, which of these or other characteristics have favoured the dialogue?*

NOTES

ⁱ Levinas, e., *Totalidad e Infinito*, Salamanca, Sígueme, 1977, pg. 89.

ⁱⁱ Küng, H; Kuschel, K.J., *Hacia una ética mundial. Declaración del Parlamento de las Religiones del mundo*, Madrid, Trotta, 1994.

ⁱⁱⁱ Vatican Council II considers ethics as a meeting place where all men meet to cooperate: “Faithful to their conscience, Christians get together with other men in order to seek the truth and solve in truth all moral problems that arise both in individual and social life”. (*Gaudium et Spes*, nº 16). This way the Council harbours the hope that even though the same faith or religious belief is not shared by everybody, all men and women of goodwill will be able to share the same ethics.

^{iv} By “*ethos*” we refer to the moral orientations really lived within the Christian community or within society.

^v These rules are enunciated in Habermas, J., *Conciencia moral y acción comunicativa*, Península, Barcelona, 1985, pg. 110-113. Habermas tells us that these rules have been established by T. Alexy in *Eine theorie des praktischen Diskurses*, in W. Oelmüller (comp), *Normenbegründung, Normendurchsetzung*, Paderborn (1978)-

^{vi} John Paul II., To representatives of non-Christian religions (Madras 5/02/1986), in AAS 78 (1986) 769. O Ecclesia 22/02/1986, pg. 32-33.

^{vii} *Ecclesiam Suam*, nº 96.

^{viii} Rahner, K., *Sobre el diálogo en la sociedad pluralista*, in *Escritos de teología*, Vol. VI, Taurus, Madrid, 1969, pg. 56.

^{ix} Díaz, C., *Pluralismo ético y convivencia social: un punto de vista más crítico*, in *Documentación Social* 83 (1991) 40.

^x L.G. nº 37. This issue speaks of the dialogue between laymen and the hierarchy, as a right and obligation in those matters which affect the good of the Church. It should be a dialogue conducted with veracity, prudence and presided over by charity.

^{xi} Häring, B., *Magisterio* contained in *Diccionario enciclopédico de Teología moral*, Madrid. Paulinas, 2 ed. 1974, pg. 601.

^{xii} Let us remember the words of St. Thomas: “...what pertains to moral science is always known through experience” (*Comentario Ética a Nicomaco*, lib 1, lect. III, nº 38).

^{xiii} Emotivism is an ethical trend that maintains moral judgements are nothing more than expressions of preferences on the plane of sentiments and, therefore, cannot be considered as true or false.

^{xiv} This is the theory of A. Auer, *Morale Autonoma e Fede Cristiana*, Cinisello Balsamo, Paoline, 1991; P. Carlotti, *Storicità e Morale. Un’indagine nel pensiero di Alfons Auer*, Roma. LAS, 1989.

^{xv} The encyclical *familiaris Consortio*, of John Paul II, already speaks of “graduality” as a pastoral norm (nº 9).

^{xvi} Other significant passages: “So we also direct our attention to those who acknowledge God and maintain religious and human elements in their traditions, and who desire that an open dialogue impels us all forward to receive with fidelity and to fulfil with readiness the impulses of the Spirit” (*Gaudium et Spes*, nº 92). “On account of the fact of having a visible social structure which is a sign certainly of her unity with Christ, the Church can and does enrich herself through the evolution of human social life...” (*Gaudium et Spes*, nº 44).

^{xvii} “And so, the Council, when giving testimony and expounding the faith of the People of God reunited by Christ, cannot show more eloquently its link, respect and esteem towards the human family, of which it forms part, than by establishing a dialogue with her (the human family) in respect of all the problems alluded to earlier, projecting on these problems the light derived from the Gospel and offering the human race the redeeming strength that the same Church, led by the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder” (*Gaudium et Spes*, mº 3).

^{xviii} “... It is incumbent on the People of God, especially on all pastors and theologians, to listen, discern and interpret, with the help of the Holy Spirit, the diverse languages of our times and to evaluate them in the light of the word of God in order that the revealed Truth can be perceived in greater depth, better understood and put forward more accurately” (*Gaudium et Spes*, nº 44)

^{xix} *Lumen Gentium*, nº 13, 22, 32.

^{xx} “In what is fundamental, unity; in what is doubtful, freedom; in all things, charity”.

© *Cristianisme i Justícia* - Roger de Llúria 13 - 08010 Barcelona (Spain)

T: 93 317 23 38 - Fax: 93 317 10 94 - espinal@redestb.es – November 2000