

Introduction

The decision to make a reflection public is based on various reasons. In particular one must be aware of having something to say in a certain ambit of knowledge, and also assess whether these notions are actually useful to scholars. Nearly 20 years have gone by since the previous *Morale Fondamentale*¹, an inspired work of my younger years, which was the outcome of seminary teachings. In the meantime, there has been a significant period of teaching at the Pontifical Urbaniana University in Rome, where students originate from the five continents. It is in this context that the author has come into contact with moral models and community *ethos* which are at times distant from the Christian matrix, as interpreted by Western culture. The existence of various attempts to formulate universal ethics is known, but the project cannot go beyond sharing very general moral principles. In fact, unless we want to surreptitiously conform languages and perspectives, there are considerable differences between the various moral settings within cultures. The idea that there is a basic sharing of certain values must be acknowledged as an actual fact. But such a varied and original experience of this plural cultural context is such as to make the dream of a common rule of ethics impracticable. In fact, a historicization of moral values and principles is conditioned by these cultural experiences.

Such diversity will firstly call into question the ability of various languages to transmit moral content that is communicable and, therefore, understandable for interlocutors whose linguistic categories are distant from the moral community that expresses itself with such language. Furthermore, there is a much more important aspect: moral truth stands out for its practical dimension, and therefore its real acknowledgment is not only linked to intellectual understanding, but also, and more importantly, its ability to give existential experience. What happens if, within a specific cultural space, people are not objectively able to live the experience of a specific moral truth? It may not be sufficient to keep presenting that truth in the same way, but neither can one decide to give up an objective dimension that characterizes it. This is where a formidable problem arises: how to hold together a universal, objective and absolute dimension of moral truth which, however, can be embraced not through an external narration, but only through personal experience lived

¹ C. ZUCCARO, *Morale fondamentale. Itinerari*, Dehoniane, Bologna 1994, 2007⁴.

through the decision of moral conscience, and always within a network of relationships.

The intention of the author is to pay special attention to historical and cultural, or rather an intercultural, dimension of morals in his reflections. On the one hand, this will make the awareness of the tangible risk of downgrading the reflection to a level of unacceptable moral relativism disappear. But on the other hand there is also an attempt to avoid the risk of a dry re-proposition, with no historical contextualisation, of “quidditative morals”. In fact, it will not be possible to conceive morals of actions in an abstract universe, disregarding their necessary relationship to people. Therefore, the approach chosen insists more on the criteria of morals, rather than unilateral paths whose apparent simplicity belies reality. This is why comparisons have been made with other disciplines – theological and otherwise – deemed useful to understand the phenomenon of morality personally experienced in relationship. Furthermore, the practical dimension of moral truth itself and the resulting importance of experience, demand that the simple reasoned style be surpassed in order to pay greater attention to the conditions of the agent. These, in fact, better represent the possibility to understand and practice moral truth. There is still the awareness that ethical intellectualism is insufficient, and the importance of motivation should be reconsidered as an existential thrust that makes action possible.

However, attention to cultural diversity, just like the tendency to an interdisciplinary cooperation in presenting the various topics, will not deprive this volume of its central epistemological trait: it is, after all, moral theology. This stresses the specific character of theological ethics that do not give up, but explicitly accept, acknowledgment of their origins in Christian revelation, and finds in the sacred Scriptures a crucial landmark. Yet, on this topic, it will be necessary to overcome a series of problems concerning the bond between morals and revelation, without sacrificing one at the expense of the other, without hybridizations, without un-relatedness. In this context, fundamentalism will be kept at a due distance, since it would forego all mediation between revealed datum and moral theology, especially that of moral conscience. On the contrary, it is this reality that the work will insist on, in the strong belief that it is the trait that more than others characterizes the person as an irreplaceable hermeneutical agent of moral debate.

Finally, one must remember that this volume has been conceived as a manual, with its own specific approach to reflection and method, with particular nuances, but with classic content which is that of fundamental morals. The guiding principal is the attempt to give the reader, who is living within a network of irreplaceable social relationships, the possibility to find, in an all too complex reality, what is needed to operate his own moral discernment. The reader may find that some aspects are touched upon, omitting many other possible considerations. The author knows this, but the reason is that these

subjects have been studied elsewhere already, and therefore there has been a preference to address the reader to what has already been published, instead of repeating it here.

There only remains to express my heartfelt gratitude to the colleagues who share the teaching of morals at Urbaniana university, and who have enriched this perspective, not always formally or explicitly. Some, like S. Bastianel, P. Carlotti, S. Majorano, B. Petrà, have been close for years, though meeting less frequently over time, others are colleagues with whom I meet almost daily, though these I have come to know more recently. Here I refer to professors L. Salutati and in particular V. Balčius, who have been patient enough to read this text and to its benefit discuss certain aspects. In addition, my gratitude goes to those professors who have accompanied me along the way before they retired, namely E. Schmid, M. Di Ianni and the late G. Colombo and A. Molinaro. A warm thank you to professor Celestino Noce, my first professor during the years of training at the presbytery, then university colleague, but more importantly a friend, for proofreading the text. A mention must also be made of the Urbaniana students who come from the four corners of the earth: their presence and their questions have determined the need to rethink moral theology in a more open and dialogue-friendly light. They too are thanked by the author.

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