

booklets

A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP
Christianity and society
from an ethical perspective



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CHRISTIANITY AND SOCIETY
FROM AN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE

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1. A DIFFICULT RELATIONSHIP FROM THE START

After the death of Jesus, the first Christians were expelled from the synagogue, with the result that the Jews ceased to view them as belonging to their religion. Instead, the Christians were marginalized and persecuted by those who before had tolerated them. This situation of conflict affected the writing of some of the gospels, as in the case of Matthew, which was written at an extremely critical moment, when the very unity of the Christian community was threatened. As Christianity expanded throughout the empire, there was an increase in accusations and hostility against these people, who were considered “atheist” because they refused to participate in the cult of the emperor and the Roman divinities. From the start, the relationship between Christianity and the society in which it spread and developed was marked by signs of conflict.

1. A SPECIFIC ETHICS

Before Christianity attained the status of official religion of the empire, Christians were a religious minority within a society that was extraordinarily pluralist in its creeds and cultures.

The Christians saw clearly that the imperial laws did not reflect their own

values but that, given the situation, they had to tolerate attitudes and behaviors which they considered evils to be avoided. There was, then, a clear dividing line between their ethics and Roman law. Christians had embraced the following of Jesus as the way of salvation,

and the Spirit of Jesus led them to form fraternal communities in which they could try to live after the manner of Jesus. Thus the Christians, in dealing with new questions that came up in the community or in their relations with non-Christians, constantly asked themselves what they should do and how they should behave in order to be more faithful to the Spirit of Jesus.

The gospel texts and the letters of Paul helped them in this discernment. In fact, those same letters reflect the ways in which the communities confronted the concrete problems of community life that sprang up in the course of Christianity's initial growth. Some questions were concerned with eating or not eating meat sacrificed to idols, and others had to do with matrimony. Since being faithful to Christ in concrete terms was the most important thing for those first Christians, they saw clearly the need for this kind of discernment.¹

As this fidelity to Christ ended up producing an ethical system quite different from the one that prevailed in the dominant culture of the empire, the Christians found themselves compelled to adopt two characteristic attitudes, one stressing their oppositional identity and the other emphasizing the universal character of Jesus' message.

1.1. Identity in opposition

The first attitude developed because Christians considered those who did not accept the Christian faith to be "pagans", and they were very severe in judging pagan practices and ways of behaving. They saw the pagan world as

opposed to the Christian world. Political authority, insofar as it was pagan, was not considered legitimate, even though sometimes, as parts of Paul's letters indicate, it seemed best for Christians to be prudently obedient so that their faith would not appear to be a danger or a threat to the empire.

Christians had to live their ethics within the community, fully realizing that outside the community they would meet up with laws which did not coincide with their vision of what was good and right. This reality could make things difficult for them and in certain situations could even lead to martyrdom. In the gospel of Matthew Jesus exhorts the community to try to solve its problems internally before having recourse to the tribunals of the pagans (Mt 18,15-17). Those favoring this first attitude of oppositional identity, therefore, practiced their Christianity as a "sect" in the sociological sense, that is, as an alternative community, which tended to view outsiders as different from or opposed to them.

Christian identity was thus affirmed in opposition to other groups, such as the Jews and the pagans, resulting a growing differentiation which at times was tolerated by others and at other times persecuted.

1.2. The universal character of the message of Jesus

The second attitude understood the message of Jesus as a universal one. This conception helped the early Christian community to be open to admitting converts from paganism and not just

from the Jewish world. As pagans of diverse origin gradually became part of the communities, some of these newly converted Christians speculated about the value of the truths which were found in the great Greek philosophers. A few of them, like Saint Justin (2nd century), saw signs or “seeds” of Jesus’ teaching in these truths that had long before been enunciated by the philosophers. Just as the Old Testament was seen as preparation for the coming of Jesus, so also was all that was valuable in Greek philosophy. This was an optimistic, positive way of evaluating the cultural context, quite different from the first attitude we discussed above. The Spirit of Jesus was thus to be found working also among other people, in all those who did good and were of good will, whether they were Christians, Jews, or pagans.

In line with this second attitude, theological reflection gradually adopted philosophical categories, beginning above all with those coming from Platonism. In the specific area of moral theory, a category taken from Stoicism, natural law, was adopted, and its use has persisted through the long history of Christian moral thought. The first Christian thinker to introduce this category was Saint Ambrose, who took some elements from Stoicism and set them in the context of God the Creator. The Stoic cosmic order, which talked in

terms of «what one must do», became «God’s good creation, which manifests the wisdom of God». The great insight on which Christian natural law is founded is that all human beings are capable of grasping the basic ethical principles of human action, and this natural law is a form of participation in the eternal law of God, that is, God’s plan for all humankind.

This insight has been criticized as a type of moral imperialism toward other cultures, but originally it was an attempt to respond to the Christian view that all men and women are children of the one God and that they therefore all enjoy the same dignity, to use modern terminology. It was only at a later stage that the universality of the natural law was called into question, when it was understood to enunciate ethical principles that were not universal, but rather were linked to a particular era or culture.

But that point would take us into another debate. Here we are interested only in observing that Christian ethics had no problem with using a category that came from a materialist philosophy to express Christian universality. Of course, it was thought necessary to complement it with the notion of sin, which served to explain something not understood by the Stoics: the fact that the natural law was not known to everybody.

2. BECOMING AN OFFICIAL RELIGION

The change of paradigm took place when Christianity became the official religion of the empire and ceased to be merely a minority that was tolerated and often persecuted. Christianity was now a religion that could count on support from political powers, and it had to face the constant temptation to use political power to spread its influence, sometimes by exercising intolerance toward other religions of the empire.

At the same time, the political powers saw in Christianity a cohesive element in a declining empire; it was a force that could contribute to socio-political unity. The attainment of official status brought about a great change in the Christian community, although perhaps more slowly and gradually than is commonly supposed. This new status explains some of the reactions which took place within the Church itself. One reaction was the birth of monasticism; it was the expression of a desire to return to the radicalism of the gospel through *fuga mundi*, fleeing from the world. This was not the only reaction, however; there were also reform movements which constantly arose in opposition to socio-political power and prestige that were perceived as contrary to the gospel.

Nevertheless, having state support made it possible for Christian ethics to take on concrete form in positive laws drawn up by legislators (emperors, kings, lords, . . .); furthermore, the state's power of coercion could be used to enforce the laws. In the view of some,

there arose the opportunity to build the *city of God* right here on earth. Laws were put in place that reflected Christian principles and punished anything those principles defined as an evil to be avoided. This procedure had the merit of opening Christian faith up to political commitment. There was a new awareness that the structures of political power did not belong just to the private realm and that love, compassion, and justice were in need of juridical ordinances to make their practice possible. At the same time, there was ambivalence in this way of proceeding. On the one hand, the structures that order society were seen as having an important role to play in promoting these values and avoiding the contrary ones; on the other hand, there was the risk of considering to be God's will some juridical prescriptions on concrete questions that did not relate to the core of Christian morality but only to the privileges of a few, who belonged to the dominant social class or to the ecclesial establishment itself.

It is no surprise that this ambivalence in the end inclined the Church toward an alliance with political power that brought about a loss of gospel radicality and prophetic ability. Many evangelical values were sacrificed because of their utopian nature: fraternity, the absolute value of human life, equality, etc. As the guiding principles of the natural moral law took on more concrete form, they incorporated contem-

porary cultural elements that were accepted uncritically. For example, the commandment «You shall not kill» could be understood literally, but it had to be interpreted in a way that would legitimize killing in those cases where other values considered more important prevailed. In this way, legitimate authority was permitted to kill the evildoer, the heretic, or anyone who

menaced that authority (*Summa Theologica* II-II, q. 64-79). As we have said, despite this loss of gospel radicality, there were constant reform movements which aimed to recover the more utopian elements of the faith. For example, the Franciscan school had a much stronger, more radical interpretation of the commandment against killing than the Thomistic school had.

2. WHAT STANCE TO TAKE, TODAY, IN A PLURALISTIC WORLD?

The Christian community should remember that in its origins it was a small community in the middle of a vast, culturally diverse empire, where it was at first tolerated, then persecuted. Later on it came to be tolerated again, and finally it gained official status which lasted for centuries. At the present time Christian churches, especially in their Catholic and Protestant forms, find themselves in the middle of a pluralist society, where they must coexist with other religions and also with other ethical perspectives. This situation requires us to reconsider many things.

1. A GLOBALLY DIVERSE SITUATION

1.1. Religious liberty recognized

Democratic states respect different religions and different ways of thinking as long as they do not contravene the fundamental rights recognized in their constitutions. In some of these states, Christian churches are in the majority and therefore enjoy much potential influence in the political and social

realms. We need only think of many nations in Latin America.

In Europe, however, Christianity occupies a minority position in a pluralist society. As a result, it has in recent years suffered a significant decrease in its membership and its ability to influence society. This change has required a process of adaptation that has not been

easy for many people or for the ecclesial institutions themselves. A certain confusion has emerged as a consequence of greater ethical and cultural diversity, which has called into question some of the norms and values held by many of the faithful. This pluralism has sometimes resulted more from sociological factors than from personal convictions. At the same time, many young people (some of them sons and daughters of believers) have given up religious practice.

This is happening at a time of weak leadership in the ecclesial institution, which has not been sufficiently agile in adapting to social change and has let itself be immobilized by inertia and fear. Such a situation can in part be explained by the advanced age of many of the persons in leadership positions.

1.2. Situations of limitation and insecurity

In our time we also find Christianity in other situations, that is, under regimes that are not democratic (or scarcely so

according to the canons of western democracies) or under regimes that are clearly dictatorial. These states may respect the presence and practice of Christianity, or they may limit it to the point where it is possible to speak plainly of persecution. Such is the case in some Islamic countries, where Christianity is restricted to the private sphere and where all forms of proselytism or conversion are prohibited. Similar is the case of China, where the state has created official churches which it controls and which are the only ones tolerated. Viewed from an excessively western perspective, such situations are often explained simplistically as obvious persecution of the Christian faith. In many cases, however, they are actually responses to historical factors whereby Christianity has been closely identified with western culture and therefore with an imperialist type of political and economic colonialism. Such identification will be seen as intolerable insofar as it imparts values that are opposed to a nation's traditional values.

2. THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL: AN ATTEMPTED RESPONSE

In many ways the Second Vatican Council was an attempt to answer questions about how Christianity should be present in a new world, a world characterized by democracy, pluralism, and

the ascendancy of the secular. We would do well here to recall certain aspects of the Second Vatican Council that will enlighten us as we ask about how best to view the world in which we live:

The Church or people of God, in establishing that kingdom, takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of any people. On the contrary it fosters and takes to itself, insofar as they are good, the abilities, the riches, and the customs in which the genius of each people expresses itself. (*Lumen Gentium*, 13)

Let them gladly and reverently lay bare the seeds of the Word which lie hidden among their fellows. (*Ad Gentes*, 11)

The Church guards the heritage of God's word and draws from it moral and religious principles without always having at hand the solution to particular problems. As such she desires to add the light of revealed truth to mankind's store of experience, so that the path which humanity has taken in recent times will not be a dark one. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 33)

We think cordially too of all who acknowledge God, and who preserve in their traditions precious elements of religion and humanity. We want frank conversation to compel us all to receive faithfully the impulses of the Spirit and to act on them energetically. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 92)

Since the Church has a visible and social structure as a sign of her unity in Christ, she can and ought to be en-

riched by the development of human social life. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44)

While rejecting atheism, root and branch, the Church sincerely professes that all men, believers and unbelievers alike, ought to work for the rightful betterment of this world in which all alike live; such an ideal cannot be realized, however, apart from sincere and prudent dialogue. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 21)

This council, giving witness and voice to the faith of the whole people of God gathered together by Christ, can provide no more eloquent proof of its solidarity with, as well as its respect and love, for the entire human family with which it is bound up, than by engaging with it in conversation about these various problems. The council brings to mankind light kindled from the Gospel, and puts at its disposal those saving resources which the Church herself, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, receives from her Founder. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 3)

With the help of the Holy Spirit, it is the task of the entire People of God, especially pastors and theologians, to hear, distinguish, and interpret the many voices of our age, and to judge them in the light of the divine word, so that revealed truth can always be more deeply penetrated, better understood, and set forth to greater advantage. (*Gaudium et Spes*, 44)

3. TOLERANCE AS A PRINCIPLE

3.1. Is everything tolerable?

Today, given the growing diversity of ethics in western societies (as regards values, beliefs...), we may wonder: is everything valid? Is everything tolerable?

In our democratic society “tolerance” is often presented as a supreme value, one to be preserved above all else. Such a position may have a certain logic for those who live in very homogeneous societies, societies in which differences invite persecution. Nevertheless, we should not fall into the trap of thinking that everything is valid or that everything can be put on the same level, especially since such a position would be tantamount to maintaining the privileged status of some persons over against others. Tolerance, if poorly understood, could contribute to sustaining unjust situations which harm the weakest persons, those who often are not recognized or taken into account.

For this reason, most cultures have opted for delimiting that which is not tolerable, and they have done so in a universal way, such as through the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. We will not here get into the debate about whether there is a clear western bias in UN’s definition of human rights in 1948. Rather, we intend simply to establish certain minimal points, even a universal level, about what is and what is not tolerable. This is nothing new; nations supposed to be democratic base their stability partly on having their

populations share a certain number of civic values, which are accepted by all and without which democracy would tend to deteriorate and even disappear.

3.2. How to deal with that which is intolerable?

Having reached this point, we may ask: how should we respond to that which we consider intolerable? In other words, how should a community, a culture, a religious tradition, or any relatively large human group respond to that which it considers intolerable? Possible responses will vary, in accord with people’s ethical convictions. Here we will focus on the perspective of Christian ethics, that is, on the perspective of the community of followers of Jesus.

3.2.1. *The use of force*

We would consider any violent response to be in principle incompatible with the message of Jesus, although we recognize that this has not always been the case: violence has historically formed part of Christianity’s and the Church’s way of acting.

In fact, even today some people ask whether it is permitted to respond to that which is intolerable with legitimate violence. Such would be the case, for example, when Christians held a political majority in a democratic parliament and consequently had authority to use coercive power. Some argue that such

violence is legitimate when aimed at preserving a value more important than the lawful violence exercised by a competent authority. That is typical understanding found in fully democratic states: it is the mission of modern democracy to make sure that laws are kept, even by the use of force, and in this case legitimate force. Nevertheless, when we deal in democratic states with important minorities whose ethical convictions are different from ours, should we exercise coercive power simply because we have the political majority? Would we not be sending an implicit message to the minorities, namely, that if they were more numerous (and came to be a parliamentary majority), their convictions would be the ones allowed and even imposed?

Let us therefore disavow the use of force; but having done so, we are still left with the question of how to deal with that which we consider intolerable on the basis of our own ethical convictions.

3.3. Conscientious objection

To begin with, it seems that, if objection of conscience is not admitted, then we are more justified in refusing to accept a practice that we view as evil but that is imposed by law and legitimate force. In other words, we could resist if we were obliged to act in a certain way (forced, for example, to use birth control or practice attenuated forms of slavery). The question arises, however: should we tolerate and accept practices seen by us as evil, when the legislation does not impose them on all but limits itself to allowing them for those who consider

them good? Should such permissiveness, which does not affect us directly or make us direct accomplices, be allowed? Let us go a bit deeper into this question.

3.3.1. Starting from a profound analysis

First of all, we need to do a thorough analysis of the intolerable nature of the practice we are questioning. We can do this sincerely before God if we keep present our own ethical tradition and engage in an intra-community dialogue which brings to light people's differing sensibilities with regard to that practice. We also need to pay heed to how science understands the practice; this will give us a deeper understanding of what it implies and what values are at stake. We should listen to the opinion of experts, whether they be scientists, sociologists, economists, doctors, or others. Such exacting analysis is needed to avoid what frequently happens: making moral judgments about certain questions, not on the strength of in-depth arguments, but on the basis of powerful interests or simply out of consideration of judgments of the past. In the world in which we live, it is best for us to be completely certain that, viewed from our ethics, a given practice is clearly dehumanizing and therefore contrary to our most basic ethical principles. Otherwise, lacking such certainty, we should manifest a "reasonable doubt" that obliges us to go deeper into the issue to see whether it might possibly be considered something morally acceptable. This device, called "doubt of conscience", forms part of our tradition, and certain moral

systems of the 17th century were aimed precisely at proposing diverse ways of escaping from this doubt.

3.3.2. *On not confusing decriminalization and legalization*

Secondly, if from the perspective of our ethical tradition we reach the conclusion that a certain practice is intolerable, we should keep in mind that we live in pluralistic societies with democratic legislative processes. The situation would be different if we found ourselves in societies where a governing minority imposed its ethical convictions. In a democratic society, we Christians have to put forth our arguments about why we consider a certain practice intolerable and then wait for a moral consensus to be reached about the matter, one that will provide grounds for democratic legislation. Such a consensus may be favorable to our convictions, it may differ from them in some way, or it may even be contrary to them. In this last case, when the majority consensus is inclined toward permissiveness and this is translated into legal permissiveness, that does not mean that this (now legal) practice has become good for us, or that it is good in itself. As we well know, legality is not the same as morality.

Although it may be hard for us to accept certain practices that are permitted by legislation, we need discern carefully what attitude we should adopt toward them. To that end it is necessary to introduce another juridical distinction: that between decriminalization and legalization.

Decriminalization is the equivalent of saying that a certain practice is not

desirable (it is not a value accepted by the majority), but that under certain circumstances, when there are conflicting values, it is no longer pursued as a criminal matter. At the same time, there are consequences: the practice does not then become a right which can be required in justice, and if it involves economic costs, they cannot be covered by public funds.

In the case of legalization, the practice becomes a right of every person. It is therefore something which can be legally demanded, and the state must assign funds so that the right can be exercised.

This distinction was suggested even in the days of Saint Augustine, in treating of the prosecution of prostitution by the state, and it is a distinction which must be taken into account when considering what our attitude should be with regard to allowing practices which from our ethical perspective we consider unacceptable.

Whatever the social consensus and the legislative process may determine, we as a Christian community can continue to make manifest our ethical convictions through our testimony and even at times through our example, by openly proposing the fittingness of pacific disobedience. Our communities may be called to live out those alternative values as a way of showing the whole society how truly humanizing they are. Such an attitude basically means accepting the fact that we live in a society which tolerates practices that for us are evil, that is, practices that our ethical convictions view as dehumanizing. What is expected of us, therefore,

is that we oppose them through dialogue and example, but not through force. Jesus taught us to combat injustice by standing with the victims and not becoming persecutors ourselves. His testimony and example were a transforming seed.

3.3.3. *Having recourse to conscientious objection*

As Christians we may exercise conscientious objection to a law that we consider unjust. The right of objection in matters of conscience has been an object of study in Christian morals from the time of the holy Fathers until the present. Conscience has been understood to be the ultimate arbiter that a person must follow in deciding about his/her actions, with all the fine distinctions one might want to make.

During the era of Christendom, however it came to be considered a sin of pride to follow one's own conscience whenever conscience went against the dispositions of the Church (both moral and juridical). In order to appeal to conscience without falling into sin, a person was required to have a correctly formed conscience, which very few were thought capable of attaining. Despite this paradox, moralists studied the problems involved in applying a specific moral law to the particular cases about which someone might be in doubt. Thus there arose different and opposed schools of thought about how to act when there was a doubt of conscience. The diverse schools sometimes came to very different conclusions, and the Church's magisterium rejected only the most extreme positions (those too

lax or too rigorous). This whole development demonstrates, interestingly, that in an epoch much more objectivist than ours, Christian moralists gave much importance to the subjective factor of morality.

As regards conscientious objection to a civil law, Christian morality has always allowed the possibility of refusing to obey a law considered "unjust". The fact that Christianity was persecuted from its origins, both by the Jews and by the Roman Empire, helped the faithful to understand the importance of placing devotion to the faith and evangelical morality above the laws issued by political powers. In fact, in most cases those who died for the faith were killed for refusing to obey laws and legal dispositions of the Roman state. However, when Christianity became the official religion, this possibility of objecting was steadily reduced.

Classical morality has attempted to define the characteristics that laws should have in order to be considered just: they should be emitted by a legitimate authority, they should serve the common good (avoiding all partiality and arbitrariness), and finally they should be in accord with what is called the natural moral law. These characteristics were enunciated in the social setting of Christendom, where there was a close link between the laws made by rulers and Christian morality. There was no ethical pluralism to speak of, and it was universally believed that the laws should be based on the principles of Christian morality.

In our present day this understanding of what makes a law just may still

be of some help to, but it does not save us from doubts and difficulties.

a) First of all, regarding legitimate authority. What makes an authority legitimate? In a democratic state we would say that, to be considered just, a law should be approved by the bodies that are democratically chosen to perform this function, that is, by the legislative power. Christians, however, even though they recognize the legitimacy of authority based on majority rule, are conscious that this criterion by itself is not sufficient for establishing what is right and what is not. In other words, we need to ask ourselves what it is that makes us more human and makes us grow together in equality and dignity.

b) Consequently, democratic legitimacy is not sufficient, so that we are obliged to have recourse to other attributes of authority, such as serving the common good and non-arbitrariness. These are classical conditions which continue to be valid in our time, even if in a pluralist world like ours it is not easy to see what precisely is meant by the common good and how the common good should be achieved.

c) Finally, the last and most complicated condition for a just law is its compatibility with natural law. The underlying premise of this condition is that all human beings, as children of one and the same God, independently of our differing cultures and nationalities, share certain great ethical principles and that these principles constitute the natural moral law. The problem is determining what those great principles are. This question has been hotly debated during the whole history of moral thinking, and

it continues to be a matter of controversy. In the past, princes were not to promulgate any law that was thought to be contrary to the principles of natural law. Nowadays we would say that no law can contravene the most widely accepted ethical principles, such as human rights. Nevertheless, even if it is true that there is broad general agreement about many of these rights, there is no lack of disagreement about particular principles and their interpretation. As a result, some people consider human rights as defined by the UN to be ethical absolutes, while other people do not. However that may be, these rights are now spelled out as fundamental and essential in the constitutions of all democratic countries, and that is an important advance.

3.3.4. In conclusion

Present-day society is quite different from the society where the right of conscientious objection was first formulated. Nowadays we have a situation of ethical pluralism, and our laws are the result of a majority consensus on certain subjects. Despite sustaining certain values (laws are never neutral from an axiological viewpoint), modern laws do not follow a single ethical pattern. As a result, in pluralist societies, certain laws can clash with the convictions or beliefs of individuals or particular groups. In other words a conflict can arise between the law and the conscience of some persons. We should understand that a pluralist society cannot expect that its laws will reflect the ethical convictions of every particular group in the society; rather, the laws should reflect the demo-

cratic consensus of the majority. At the moral level, we claim that legality does not determine what is good or what is bad, so that we can hardly expect that laws will reflect a particular ethics in those matters where a majority of the people is opposed. Often laws are made which try to avoid the worst evils by regulating particular matters that before were unregulated. While we would like to think that the laws should prohibit all evils, the viewpoint of classical Christian morality has been that certain evils cannot be prohibited, since not even their prohibition will succeed in eradicating them.²

In our society, as we have already remarked, the laws must respect the consensus that exists on certain ethical absolutes regarding human rights, as these are enunciated in the constitutions of different nations. An attempt is thus made to infringe as little as possible on particular ethical viewpoints, but even so, it can happen that the majority allows or promotes something which a particular group of people considers clearly an evil to be avoided. For this reason, democratic countries have allowed the possibility of conscientious objection in those cases where a possible conflict can arise between the law and the conscience of certain individuals with definite convictions. There are many situations in which this may be the case: abortion, post-coital contraception, voluntary sterilization, assisted reproduction, euthanasia, assisted suicide, forced feeding of those on a hunger strike, cooperation with the police, participation in the death penalty, transfusions, psychological surgery, etc.

Customarily, conscientious objection has gained legal status in two spheres especially: refusal to wage war and professional objection. In the latter case, objection has mainly to do with the practice of abortion and active euthanasia in those countries where they are legalized, and also with certain spheres of scientific research.

3.4. Cooperation with sin

Conscientious objection is the obverse side of a very important topic in morality, especially in a world as complex as ours: cooperation with sin. The classical argument attempted to answer the question about whether one could cooperate with another person's sin, understanding sin as an action which clearly causes some evil. Nowadays the matter is more complicated, since many of our concrete actions take place within the context of institutions where we work or help out (businesses, hospitals, political parties, non-profit organizations, etc.) and it is often the case that we are not the ones who initiate these actions.

Such cooperation may compromise our personal convictions, for it is not unusual for tensions to arise among various factors: our tolerance with respect to what our companions do at work, what we are obliged to do by the business or the institutions that employ us, and what fidelity to our own conscience demands of us.

3.4.1. When is cooperation allowed?

The classical thesis regarding cooperation with sin states that it is never per-

missible to cooperate when we share the sinful intention of the principal agent of the action and demonstrate our agreement. But then the question is raised: what if we cooperate or assist but do not share the intention of the principal agent? At that point conditions are set down for allowing such cooperation.

The first condition is that the action which I perform and which helps the other person must in itself be good or indifferent. A clear example would be sweeping up a laboratory in which research on bacteriological warfare is being done; such an action is itself good or indifferent.

The second condition concerns whether there is a proportionate motive for such cooperation. For example, is my cooperation necessary or not for the evil action to be carried out? Or would my refusing to cooperate bring about an even more serious evil? (That is, by cooperating do I avoid even worse evils?) Classical morality had already debated the question of committing a lesser evil in order to avoid greater evils. A recent example from the magisterium concerns whether a Catholic legislator may cooperate in the elaboration of a law permitting abortion. Such cooperation is allowed if the legislator clearly rejects abortion as such and seeks to attenuate the provisions of the law (*Evangelium Vitae*, 73).

3.4.2. *Cooperate or object? That is the question!*

Nowadays many of us are working in institutions in which we cooperate with actions that do not arise from our

initiative. This requires us to be constantly asking the question: should I cooperate or object? And if I cooperate, why do I do so? Is it to avoid greater evils? If I did not cooperate, would the action be prevented? Also, what would happen if no one cooperated? These are not trivial questions. Discernment about such matters is needed. We should not allow ourselves to be dragged into cooperation through inertia, as if it were something inevitable and unavoidable. We sometimes take note of extreme cases of cooperation with evil, but every day we cooperate on a smaller scale in actions which are not good.

Often the easy way out of the problem of cooperation is dualism. That is, we privatize our Christian convictions, limiting them to worship and the sphere of the family, while our public lives are run according to the criteria of the business or the organization. This is clearly a new version of trying to serve two masters (Mt 6, 24). Obviously, what is most difficult is trying to discern between *cooperating* in a way that does not involve renouncing what one believes in and *opposing* an action by means of objection or denunciation.

We should remember that, when not recognized by authority, conscientious objection to the laws of a state or to a religious group's particular moral norms can involve juridical penalties or even rejection and marginalization in relation to the group to which one belongs. For this reason, public gestures which go against a social consensus can in some cases have a prophetic value of dissent and thus motivate other people to raise questions about the law. We

should not forget that dissent has often been the source of moral evolution.

Since it concerns a personal decision, it is not easy to subject conscientious objection to outside judgment. However, if we consider freedom of conscience and cultural pluralism to be important social values, then we should include conscientious objection among the fundamental rights.

Every Christian has the right to follow his/her own conscience, even when that means excommunication,³ provided that there has been a precise discernment, which presupposes a conscience that seeks to be well informed and to form itself. According to classical Christian doctrine, conscience, even when mistaken, does not lose its dignity (*Gaudium et Spes*, 16).

3.5. What are the limits of conscientious objection?

We need to respond to this question both from the perspective of morality, whether Christian or not, and from the perspective of law.

In the juridical practice of most democratic countries, conscientious objection receives little legal recognition. Objection to military service is recognized in some countries, as is professional medical objection in cases of extreme conflict, such as abortion. But this does not mean that conscientious objection cannot be practiced in many other spheres and situations. We are thus obliged to ask whether it is a right which society is required to limit.

For example, some people think that in a democratic society a person cannot

be denied a service guaranteed by law, especially a public health service or some other publicly financed service. This argument is based on the right of the client to request what is legally permitted, but this right must be harmonized with the right to conscientious objection, and therefore provision must be made so that the two rights can be exercised simultaneously.

Though it appears easy in principle, we must be careful about how we state the problem, since in practice a right should be exercised without professional pressures or repercussions. In affirming the right to conscientious objection, public institutions have to make sure that this right does not give rise to labor discrimination, but at the same time they have to make sure that people receive the services due them.

Let us think, for example, of the case in which the exercise of a right might endanger important belongings of many persons. Let us imagine the case of a highly contagious epidemic which requires quarantine, and some people are opposed to this measure because they do not believe western scientific theories about the origin of diseases. Or think of the doctor who appeals to conscientious objection in order not to perform a low-risk operation because the patient will not allow a blood transfusion in case it should be necessary. And we could consider many other cases or situations, especially in our ever more pluralist world, where there would be frequent appeal to this right of conscientious objection.

Finally, the legitimacy of conscientious objection derives from the value

that is given to conscience in Christian morality, for it always presupposes a subjective evaluation of a law or a command. It is possible that there are cases where such a judgment is easier, since a given command or law violates some value considered basic and absolute; an example might be the orders issued in totalitarian political regimes. It is always necessary, however, to discern carefully before objecting, since an objection might be concealing hidden personal interests which are not completely oriented toward seeking the truth of that which one's conscience thinks correct.

3.6. An ethics enlivened by the Spirit

The Christian community has remained faithful to the Spirit of Jesus and has sought to practice the most humanizing way of life possible, based on the example of the gospels. The community is conscious that this Spirit has become ever more present through the different services that it offers in its attempt to respond to the ethical challenges it meets up with.

Some persons in the community have in the past offered in a special way the service of ethical discernment. Examples of this are the teachings of the popes, the bishops, the theologians, and all the saints who have prophetically incarnated gospel values in their lives. There has been a long path of inquiry and study, in which certain values have been strengthened while others have been diluted or have passed through

moments of darkness. We have learned to be more human; we have better understood the meaning of «do not kill» and «do not steal» and «be more just». There has been a definite evolution in our ethical sensibility with regard to certain questions.

Fresh challenges and new, much more subtle ways to perpetrate evil urge us to go forward and trying to find more refined answers. Moreover, it sometimes happens that certain values that were part of our original tradition, but then were neglected for years, gain prominence once again, precisely because of our “adversaries”. For example, the French Revolution, despite its anti-clerical trends, reminded us of the values of human liberty, equality, and fraternity. Similarly, Marxist “materialism” has reminded us that making private property sacrosanct is not a Christian value. Such reminders should make us humbler and more open to the type of ethical investigation that continually seeks a more humanizing response to the world's problems.

Christian ethics, in virtue of its major principles, puts itself forward as the most human manner of living in our present day and age, but precisely for this reason it needs to walk side by side with all of humankind, as Vatican II recommends in the texts we cited at the beginning of the chapter. We must listen carefully to other traditions, since we are well aware that in the course of history the Spirit has spoken through them and that our ethics is exigent but not exclusive. Indeed, that is what makes it fully humanizing.

3. NEW COORDINATES FOR A NEW SITUATION

In some countries, Christianity may even now fall prey once again to the two temptations typical of any group or community which feels itself to be in a minority position within a pluralist society. We are in need of new coordinates for this new situation.

1. SOME TEMPTATIONS TO AVOID

1.1. The temptation to withdraw

When we feel ourselves to be a minority, not understood by others, and even “under attack” (in the mild sense, since religious liberty exists in democratic societies), there arises the temptation to close ourselves off and to withdraw into our community, thereby accentuating our group identity in opposition to others. In the sphere of ethics, such withdrawal involves reinforcing our traditional beliefs, making them more homogeneous, and abandoning ethical inquiry in the face of new situations. Sometimes ethical inquiry is not only abandoned but considered suspicious:

aspersions are cast upon the faith of those who engage in ethical investigation or in dialogue with other moral traditions present in our society may become object of mistrust.

In response to this attitude, which is often a “reactive” or “defensive” one, we might recall that we should not be fearful of being a minority as long as we are a consequential minority. We are called to be the salt of the earth or leaven in the dough, images which the written gospels use to describe a minority community. The temptation to ask that our community space be respected, not leaving that space in return, hardly

seems to be an attitude faithful to the example of Jesus, who was totally open to others. Curiously, such an attitude may well suit a pluralist society, which tends to favor the privatization of what is communal or personal. Such a society encourages a certain “ghettoization”, which allows people to cultivate their personal values in private. This type of attitude might also betray a misled understanding of the Spirit of Jesus as dwelling exclusively within the Christian community.

1.2. The temptation of Christendom

Another undesirable attitude would be to long for a situation similar to what existed in the times of Christendom. That would mean aspiring to real (political or social) power, which would allow for greater influence on society. To achieve that it would be necessary to win quotas of power by means of political parties, foundations, or lobbies. This second temptation has to be analyzed carefully since it can lead to deception.

Certainly Christianity aspires to have a public presence, and this aspiration emerges from an ethics which envisions the world as a place where there is greater justice, fraternal relations among peoples, and a growing equality of opportunity. It hardly makes any sense to speak of the privatization of Christian faith and Christian ethics. Thus, anyone who wishes to reduce ethics to questions of sexuality or personal and family relations is mistaken. Some pluralist societies readily allow

the Church to seclude itself within its defined space, but they are suspicious when it seeks any form of public presence. In those societies which have in the past lived under the powerful influence of the Church, it sometimes happens that, without a clear statement to that effect, the Church is hindered or obstructed in the public arena, whereas other social movements in the civil society are allowed more space.⁴

The basic problem, then, is not the Church’s presence, which is an indispensable element of the Christian DNA. The problem is that this necessary presence may take a form that enters into contradiction with fundamental values of Christian ethics. Let us recall that Christian ethics has always stated that the end (a good purpose) –for example, having a law passed which prohibits something we consider evil– does not justify the use of means which are not good. Sometimes certain representatives of the Church make use of the same means employed by politicians, without considering the ethics of using them. We need to consider seriously that not everything is valid and that not every means, even if effective and acceptable by many, is in accord with Jesus’ way of acting as we understand it through the gospels.

The fact that others perform some action is not a weighty reason for our doing so. Let us recall the radicality of the message of Jesus, who recommended turning the other cheek. Jesus presupposes a different logic, which is more in the political and social line of somebody like Gandhi, and we need to understand that logic well in order to

know how to apply it. For this reason, we need to ask ourselves: what should we be doing as a community of follow-

ers of Jesus in our present-day communities, and to what kind of public presence should we aspire?

2. NEW COORDINATES

2.1. Not renouncing the prophetic mission

We cannot renounce our prophetic role, especially now, when our world is in urgent need of ever greater humanization. There are many serious problems, and we as Christians have much to say about them, even though solving them is not just our task, but that of all humanity. The problems include poverty in the world, unjust distribution of scarce resources, climatic change, scarcity of water and energy resources, etc. We should not be afraid to denounce injustices. To be credible, there are two things we need to consider. First, if we denounce injustice, we must commit ourselves to finding solutions, and to do so as community and within our own community. Second, for our denunciations to be credible, we must measure all the questions with the same yardstick, that is, we must be equally rigorous or considerate in every case.

2.2. The logic of Jesus: interdependence

Our ethics, that is, our values, can offer men and women of good will a different

kind of logic for dealing with ethical challenges: a logic based on Jesus' style.

Our cultural setting makes us think first about ourselves and prevents us from developing an attitude based on the interdependence of all beings. We are all related to one another, and our life in great measure depends on others. Unfortunately we have not learned to experience ourselves as gifts to one another. In relating to others, we often treat them as simple objects, and we do this not only with animals and plants but also with our fellow human beings. When this happens, we do not experience their thoughts, their feelings, or their sufferings as our own. Rather, we relate to them as if they were objects that we observe and manipulate but that do not oblige (from Latin, *ob-ligare*, bind) us in any way. We are convinced that our *self* has no need of anything but *itself* in order to survive, but even if we do feel a need for others, there is a tendency to treat them as objects, or as little more than a function of ourselves.

This way of relating to that which is not *oneself* is expressed in different ways; it is expressed epistemologically, that is, in the way we know reality, and also in economic and social relation-

ships. We have created an economy with an anthropocentric bias: it thinks mainly of the human species and views the environment only in relation to the human. Such an economy is based on the erroneous principle of putting human welfare before the welfare of everything else, as if we humans were independent realities. We still keep citing and applying Mandeville's *Fable of the Bees*, which argues that if everyone thinks just of his/her own benefit, then in the long run everybody will be better off.

Perhaps we have to begin to relate to one another on the basis of interdependence, understanding that the good of the individual and the good of the collectivity are inseparable. We need to become aware that our earlier error has resulted in incredible suffering for three-quarters of humankind and for the planet's flora and fauna. A new awareness of our interdependence will stimulate an ethics of universal compassion, such that all living beings can continue to thrive on. Since it is only the human species that can exercise this responsibility, we must act as the conscience of the planet. This will be possible only if we are able to behave compassionately toward those of our own species and toward all other beings, uniting the common destiny of all men and women with the destiny of the whole biosphere. This interdependence also finds expression in the communion of all beings, a communion which should lead us to attend especially to those who are weakest and to care for them as if we were caring for ourselves, because their suf-

fering affects us personally. If we put all this into practice, then we will understand that the ecological problem is actually a problem of planetary justice.

Interiorizing this value of interdependence leading us to compassion is not easy, for it is opposed to the dominant values in our culture. We need to make ordinary people aware that they are the only ones who can keep the pressure on those planetary "powers" which resist the needed changes and which often count on us as their conservative allies. We need to ask why we ourselves resist change and why we become such willing accomplices of the powerful.

Some people believe that the problem will slowly but surely resolve itself as new generations are educated to greater awareness. Others believe that only some extraordinary disaster will make us confront the problem in terms of the sheer survival of the planet; only after suffering catastrophe will we be moved toward greater solidarity and readiness to sacrifice our present levels of consumption. It would be a situation similar to what happens in a war economy. This latter vision may appear pessimistic, but if we examine the history of the 20th century, we can see that the great ethical declarations have been motivated by truly inhumane situations and elaborated in their wake. Recall, for example, that the UN Declaration of Human Rights (1947) was formulated after the Second World War and that the condemnation of experimentation with humans came only after the awful experiments of Nazism.

2.3. Living our values and not just talking about them

Within our Christian communities we need to live the fullness of Christian values. This is the only way to show that they are fully human and that it is possible to put them into practice. Our very lives have to incarnate these values and thus be an example for other men and women throughout the world. It is not a matter just of talking; we need to make our style of life attractive and fully humanizing. Jesus attracted many people to his manner of living, to his acceptance of others, to his love for the outcasts of his society, to the way he interpreted the scriptures. What we need today, more than words, are lives which give evidence of goodness and love, without great speeches.

2.4. Together with others, in dialogue

We must remain open to others and be attentive to the differing sensibilities found, for example, in volunteer organizations, social movements, and NGOs, because these also aspire to make this world more fully human. We need to join hands with all men and women of good will to find solutions to the global problems. We are impelled to do this precisely by the Spirit of Jesus, who is always our strength and our motivation. Other people may do it for other motives, or perhaps the same Spirit will also be impelling them.

There are many pathways of collaboration. Some pass through small actions of a more local nature; others

involve participation in large projects of global ethics, which seek consensus on basic principles regarding what is truly humanizing. These principles aim to be valid for every ethical tradition, so that they can be offered as guiding standards for legislation at both the national and the global level. Our participation in the search for this consensus is a practical way by which our ethical tradition and sensibility can be heard and have historical effect, even if there is not total acceptance of our point of view. In practice this means opening ourselves up to every instance of dialogue that is seeking to develop shared ethical principles. Moreover, our contribution to these dialogues might be first of all our understanding of the dialogue itself.

2.4.1. The religious dimension of dialogue

Certainly we have to realize that often we Christians have not engaged in dialogue. We have sought to impose our ideas and our beliefs on everybody else. We therefore need to speak in the humble manner of those who are searching and learning.

We also need to unmask those Christians who find no value in dialogue or think it quite unnecessary. Dialogue cannot be considered only a secular activity, for everything has a religious dimension, which we as Christians should recognize. Let us recall the word of Paul VI's encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*: «To this inner drive of charity which seeks expression in the external gift of charity, we will give the name 'dialogue'» [no. 64].

These words should profoundly affect us as Christians, for they show that charity or love, as God's gift to human beings, receives the name of dialogue when it involves opening up to others. Dialogue is most definitely a way of loving others.

In true dialogue the interlocutors must want to present themselves to one another just as they are, with all that their existence, their experience, and their knowledge has made them. The word uttered by one person is placed side by side with the other's word on a basis of equality. The two words, as they meet together, should pursue the truth through objective analysis of the problem. The two interlocutors must therefore be honest with themselves, recognize the subjective content of their word, and allow the truth to emerge as the two words converge. Convergence does not mean dominance; rather, it means coming ever closer to the truth, with both sides shifting from their initial positions.

2.4.2. Listening and getting out of oneself

In a way, the first step toward convergence is found in the ability to listen and to understand from the other's point of view.⁵ Listening means wanting to be in communion with the other and accepting the other's words as they are, without manipulating them to be the way I want them.

This ability to listen and this desire to enter into convergence toward the truth must take place within the love we have for our neighbor. Loving difference means being ready to give one's

life for the one who defends the truth. Dialogue is a way of loving one's neighbor, of seeing in the neighbor a friend and not an enemy who can do me harm. Learning to dialogue is learning to appreciate difference as a source of growth that enriches us in the process of seeking truth.

Entering into dialogue means abandoning the logic of possession and entering into the logic of communion, where human relationships are free and liberating.

From this perspective, we Christians enter into dialogue fully aware that we do not possess the fullness of truth. We realize that we have to get out of ourselves and undergo a certain learning process. It is only through dialogue that we learn to love our neighbor. The fears that come upon us as we enter into dialogue are fears about losing our certainties, especially those we find at the heart of our ecclesial culture, partly built on inflexible opinions. We must follow the example of Abraham, abandoning our own security and traveling to a distant, unknown land.

2.4.3. Dialogue, confidence, pardon

As Christians, we are called to undertake the kind of dialogue we have indicated here, even if our interlocutor starts off from a position of dominance or manipulation. We must enter into dialogue out of love and strive to inspire in our neighbor a confidence that will allow him to let go of his defense mechanisms and thus engage in a fluid dialogue. In the words of the encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, what gives dialogue «its authority is the fact that it affirms the truth,

shares with others the gifts of charity, and is itself an example of virtue» [no. 81].

The dialogue between God and human beings has been marked by God's desire to begin the conversation and keep it going, but on our part it has been marked by our infidelities and lack of perseverance. As a result, a new and different way of relating has been created, one based on pardon.

We Christians need always to keep this in mind and practice it whenever we dialogue: we need to be willing to forgive our neighbor despite any evil he may have caused us, and we need an attitude of repentance for anything we might have done to generate or perpetuate conflicts.

In our pluralist society we need to show ourselves to be agents of reconciliation, capable of forgiving others and thus breaking the infernal circle of violence. Jesus, in counsels we may find utopian, said that we have to love our enemies, turn the other cheek, go the extra mile ... and if we have doubts, we need only recall the way he died on the cross. Jesus calls for an attitude that is certainly prophetic, opposed to the inevitability of the endless circles of violence. Many Christians who have lived in a situations of generalized violence have been able to bear witness to this.

Some may think that such a vision is impractical; but is it not actually a more realistic attitude than letting ourselves be swept into never-ending cycles of violence? If someone does not take the first step, even at the risk of his/her own life, the spiral of violence will only continue to grow and become ever

stronger. The complexity of many social situations demands lengthy processes of dialogue and consensus, but the first steps are always taken by prophets, by those who are misunderstood and rejected, but who are capable of opening up paths of loving reconciliation between opposed factions. We as Christians must strive to be able to take those steps without fear.

In all that I have been trying to say up to this point, I do not deny the fact that in a situation of generalized injustice, where there has been institutionalized or terrorist violence by either or both sides, the process of reconciliation is difficult. Even though that process must eventually end in forgiveness on the part of Christians, it must also shed light on the deeds committed, for it is not possible to conceal so many deaths and such grievous repression without their having very profound effects. Before being able to pardon, the victims require justice; they need to know the truth about what actually happened; and they definitely need to be recognized as victims. That is what has happened—or at least what should have happened—in cases such as South African apartheid, the many Latin American dictatorships, and countless other situations. The truth about a conflict is a great help towards its resolution.

2.5. Especially with other religious traditions

Through dialogue the rich ethical traditions of the world's religions will be able to demonstrate how much they coincide in many things, and it will be

plainly seen how religious groups can be a humanizing factor within our societies. An example of this dialogue is found in the *Declaration of a World Ethics*, issued by the World Parliament of Religions in 1993.

The great religious traditions would do well to dialogue in an attempt to reach broad agreement about how to deal with the major challenges facing humankind. To that end they should avoid sectarianism and refuse to let themselves be manipulated by the political interests of the countries where they are prevalent. One of the first areas of mutual understanding should deal with achieving pacific solutions in conflicts which are aggravated by religious factors, especially since these conflicts are hindering development in many poor countries. The dialogues most urgent today are those between Christianity and Islam and between Hinduism and Islam.

A second area of mutual understanding should be based on the common respect that all the great traditions have for creation. Efforts should be made to organize a common front for resolving ecological problems, many of which are primarily affecting poor and developing countries. These problems should be shown to be intimately linked to the problem of planetary injustice which results from the gross evil distribution of resources.

2.6. Accepting our *kenosis*

In other words, we Christians need to be “leaven” in a pluralist world. Refusing to seek power does not mean yielding to

realities we consider to be inhuman. As we have already stated, our prophetic task means announcing, through our lives and our communities, the unconventional nature of our alternative values. Our refusal to put up with evil leads us to keep up the struggle, even if from powerlessness. It is also important that we not get caught up only in the extremely pessimistic discourse of denunciation, but rather announce and live to the full the values we proclaim.

Our hope is hidden in the small changes, those, as we said, which affect the ways we relate to one another as humans and the way we relate to the natural world. Such changes can produce structures that yield a great potential for good. Just as we speak of structures of social sin which foster and breed injustice, so also we can speak positively of structures of good, which favor the doing of good.

2.7. Giving life

Our ethics inspired in the following of Jesus should lead us to be profoundly motivated to give our lives for others, knowing that the forces opposed to the building of human community are very strong and that they often employ generalized violence or deceit. There is no need for us to be naïve, but our faith assures us that evil will not have the final word. The efficacy of love and non-violence may be slow, but it captures human hearts, even the most hardened ones, since every human being is a child of God and nothing should make us forget that spark of the Spirit that exists in every person.

Often we may be tempted to pursue our objectives using quick means, such as violence or manipulation. We Christians are not exempt from this as individuals, nor is the Church exempt, since it is an institution always on the road to conversion. As a result, we should constantly be exercising discernment in order to fine-tune our ethical statements and free them of selfish biases. We need to be aware that our history is full of mistakes and that we have often used power to impose ethical beliefs on others.

This reality should make us more humble in our search for more human ways of living as we attempt to apply our great principles to new and often complex situations.

2.8. Asking for the right to speak

We need to request of our pluralist society that we be given a “voice”, along with the other voices. Our voice will be without privileges but also without exclusions, in a society that is neither religious nor anti-religious. Some countries appear to have little regard for any sort of religious ethics, even though their religious traditions have for thousands of years offered ethical counsels that have helped toward social progress.

Countries with a western tradition need to be aware that their own cultures and ethical systems would be inexplicable without reference to the role Christian ethics has played in their development.

The UN Declaration of Human Rights draws on the Judeo-Christian

ethical tradition, along with other traditions. The long ethical progress of humankind cannot be understood without reference to these great religious traditions. No favor is done to the new generations, therefore, when they are deprived of knowledge of those traditions and of their ethical contributions to humankind. Just a few examples would include the sensitivity toward poor people, widows, and orphans that we find in Judaism; the equality of all persons proposed by Buddhism in its critique of the Indian caste system; the radical pacifism of Jesus and the Buddha; and the contributions to international law made by the School of Salamanca and Hugo Grotius.

In recent years the European countries have experienced a wave of immigration that has enriched them with people coming from different cultures. Since these people also have their own ethical traditions, it is necessary that these be taken into account by the receiving societies, which are often highly secularized and ill-prepared for dealing with differing value systems. Likewise, the religions themselves need to be conscious of their faults and to ask pardon for their failure to be faithful to their own traditions, such as when they have defended corrupt practices because of self-interest or alliances with political and economic powers.

Countries with other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Islam, have undergone less secularization, so that they still hold these traditions in high esteem. Not all these countries have governments that are democratic in the broadest sense of the term, such that the

whole population participates in decision-making, and voice is given to cultural and religious minorities. In many places there is still an excessive identification of political power with religious power, and that brings many problems in its wake. We should be aware, all the same, that these undemocratic situations are very similar to what was taking place in Europe during the period we call Christendom.

This unsatisfactory state of affairs should not be used as an excuse for considering the ethical contributions of these traditions only from an European, democratic perspective.

2.9. The need to nourish spirituality

We need to insist that our secularized society not neglect the nourishing of

spirituality as a vital human dimension. Only thus will we escape from the vortex of materialism, which is not exactly moving us toward a more human and more just world. Without seeking exclusive rights for themselves, the great religious traditions have always cultivated the deepest dimensions of personhood.

2.10. Claiming the right to conscientious objection

This is a right that needs to be recognized in the constitutions of nations. It will not be easy to specify precisely the areas where this right may be invoked, but respect for conscientious objection will give evidence of the maturity of a pluralist democratic society which pays due heed to ideological and moral diversity.

Finally, as Christians, we have a long road ahead of us, we have a challenge being offered to us, and we have the conviction that we have something valuable to offer. We are called to walk together with other groups in our society, with all those who are struggling on behalf a new world, one that is more human and more just.

NOTES

1. To be fair, however, we should say that this ethical dimension was not the one that generated the most controversy among Christians. The greatest divisions were the result of their theological explorations into the mystery of Jesus and their attempts to formulate dogmas that would reflect the community's faith experience; ethical differences were a quite secondary cause of division.
2. See for example the texts of Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas regarding prostitution: *S.Th.* I-II, q. 96 art. 2, ad 2, ad 3.
3. Expressed this way by Saint Thomas in *De Veritate* 17, art. 4, ad 4.
4. For a thorough examination of this topic, see the book by J. I. GONZÁLEZ FAUS and Javier VITORIA, *Presencia pública de la Iglesia. ¿Fermento de fraternidad o camisa de fuerza?* Barcelona, Cristianisme i Justícia, 2009.
5. «Confidence is also necessary; confidence not only in the power of one's own words, but also in the good will of both parties to the dialogue». *Ecclesiam suam*, 81.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. How do we maintain our own identity and at the same time open ourselves to a universal message in today's world?

- Sometimes a tension arises between tolerance and being faithful to one's own conscience (p. 16). Describe moments when being what we are runs the risk of closing us off to what others are.
- What are the paths that will help us not to surrender our principles but at the same time not to condemn others?

2. How can we be tolerant and still resist what is intolerable? Indicate the steps that have been recommended regarding this topic.

- Is everything tolerable? Is everything valid?
- Do you think this topic is important for the education of our young people?

3. Do we understand well the difference between decriminalization and legalization? (p. 13)

- In what instances can one make a conscientious objection?
- What does cooperating mean to you? When is this permitted?– What does objecting mean to you? What are the limits?
- Reflect on this statement: «Some people think that in a democratic society a person cannot be denied a service guaranteed by law». State your position in this regard and give your reasons for holding it.

4. We are in a new, pluralist society, and we can fall into old temptations that hinder creativity and commitment.

- Do you think we are in danger of feeling “under attack”?
- Do you think we may be tempted to return to “the trenches”?

5. This booklet propose new ways of doing things. Give some examples, and share some ideas that you think are realizable and that help toward a change of lifestyle.

- What new movements provide a solid future for Christian ethics?

6. To whom would you recommend this booklet? Why?

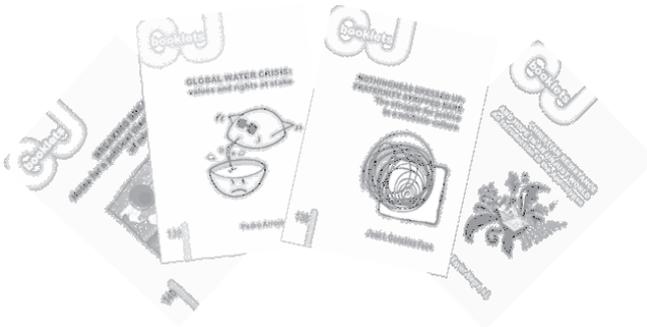
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