

Catholic Dogma of Piety and Harmony in Human Education in Vietnam Today

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Abstract: Facing the instability within the family life and in the society worldwide as well as in Vietnam, people tend to discuss more and more the issues of morality and ethics and seek solutions to the lack of stability. Among them, the views and solutions of religions have been discussed quite a lot. There are two different viewpoints on the issue. The first is a sceptical view towards the power of the religious ethics in converting man to be more moral, arguing that, though religions have been with mankind for so long, with the teachings of all religions being for the practices of good deeds and harmony/concord, crime and violence are still increasing. Meanwhile, the others hold the view that the values of religious ethics and morals in the behaviours within the family and in the society do remain.

Keywords: Piety and harmony/peace/concord, Catholicism, family, society.

1. Introduction

Catholic dogmas include two important ones, namely the filial piety and affections to one's parents and family, and the benevolence and kindness to people in a society.

The Catholic Church has called for people to be harmonious, give love to others and bring peace to the world, but the numbers of conflicts and wars are still increasing day by day. Crimes, violence, moral crises both in families and societies bring about worries, unrest and doubt towards the power of change of each religion's dogma of harmony. In this paper, the author discusses the humane Catholic

values of piety and harmony in human education in Vietnam today.

2. Filial piety in families

In the first days after it was brought into Vietnam, there was misunderstanding of Catholicism, regarding filial piety on whether to worship God only or to worship one's ancestors. However, in the Bible (Old Testament and New Testament) filial piety is expressed in many sentences, paragraphs and sayings encouraging children to be pious to their parents, and it is considered the ground

for people to be redeemed: “Those who honour their father atone for sins, and those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasure” [5, Vol.3, pp.3-4]; “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” [5, Vol.20, p.12]. Piety is also one of Ten Commandments and a fundamental Catholic moral. The ten commandments are divided into two groups: the first three ones are related to God (worshipping God; loving Him before all; keeping the Sabbath day holy); the other seven relate to people and among them, filial piety is the first act (honouring parents; not murdering; not committing adultery; not stealing; not giving false testimony against your neighbour; not coveting your neighbour’s wife or husband or any of their belongings), which demonstrates that filial piety to one’s parents is the most respected commandment in one’s relations to others. It is taught in the Bible that if we do not honour our parents, our brothers and sisters and our beloved ones, those who love us and sacrifice for us visibly, how can we truly respect invisible God in the heaven whose sacrifice must be experienced by faith?

So, piety is closely focused on and considered the ground of Catholic morals. However, it is targeted at piety to God because God is the true father of every being. Alexandre de Rhodes in his Trinitarian theology stated that the father had three levels – high, middle and low. At the high level, the father is the Lord in heaven; at the middle one, the father is the Church and one’s nation, and at the low one, the father is the one who gives birth to us. Therefore, those Catholic people who

are pious must fulfil all the duties of piety at the three levels. Duties to the Lord come first and the other duties follow them.

This is what is taught in the Bible but that does not mean the Catholic people underestimate the piety towards their parents, brothers and sisters as compared with that to God, for in the New Testament, Saint John stated: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar; for whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” [5, Vol.4, p.20]. This means the more the Catholics love God, the more they honour their parents, brothers and sisters.

Nowadays, there are more and more challenges to the family base both in the world and in Vietnam. In Europe, the divorce rate has reached 50%, whereas in Vietnam, the divorce rate, domestic violence and filial impiety also increase. People become richer and live more comfortably, but they have less and less time for their parents and children. Life is hustle and education of children relies mostly on schools and the society rather than the parents. As money is used as a measure for values, whoever earns a lot of money is respected and whoever does not earn much money will have no voice in educating his or her children. In a society, when the rich are more respected and material things become purposes of life, human ideals get increasingly dependent on money. Values such as piety, loyalty and chastity in all relationships seem to be “overturned” or no longer valid as the measures of morality, personality, virtues and influences. Over the past decade, the moral degradation and the sexual rebellion

that Westerners once named Sex Revolution have been occurring in Vietnam.

To counter the situation, “a homegrown bailout strategy” has been implemented with multiple solutions, most of which are done in the unusual way of “fighting fire with fire” such as not getting married; staying single and having easy sex; partnering without marriages etc. Dealing with these phenomena, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has given some solutions to reinforce the family base, which are grounded in the fundamental morality of the Bible. The Church deems that, when morality falls, the grace from God to become a priest declines too. Therefore, reinforcement of the family base and individual ethical values is a mission the Church pursues to reinforce the faith in God and an important task in religious expansion and development that it aims at. Being pious in the family will help fulfil duties towards God as the family is another church at home.

Due to these factors, the Catholic Church takes care of family issues, including the relationships between husbands and wives and between parents and children. Hence, love between husbands and wives and their marriage are a plan, a creation and God’s magnificent work for “...what God has joined together, let man not separate” [5, Vol.10, p.9]. When someone has an unhappy marriage or is abandoned by his or her partner, he or she can see it as a paid sin and should continue finding happiness in doing good things so that he or she will find true happiness in the next life. Extramarital sexual relationships, for any reason and in any form, are severe sins that destroy the purity with which the Eucharist is attached,

and pollutes the church of the Holy Spirits as well as the sinner’s own body. Human life is wholly protected and deemed to be completely respected even when it is in the form of a foetus, with living to be an inalienable right, therefore, a person who procures an abortion is considered to have incurred automatic excommunication from the Church. These are what the Church teaches and confirms repeatedly and continually in various forms to its followers. As for clergymen who devote themselves to serve the Church, they consider their work a calling (God calls them, chooses them and sends them on missions) and thus they shall fulfil their commitments not only in families but also in communities, that is, they take care of the old, the miserable, the sick, the handicapped and those who commit sins. In this sense, the clergymen do not escape from real life or avoid responsibilities and duties but try to become good examples of filial piety.

Human behaviours are habitual. Studying moral lessons, hearing and seeing good examples day by day, one will have more inspirations to change their behaviours. The enduring, strict and patient teachings of the Church on filial piety have been deeply absorbed by its followers and they voluntarily and spontaneously practice these teachings. As a result, in regions of Catholic followers, the divorce and abortion rates are often low, with social evils like theft, prostitution, gambling, drug addiction, domestic violence etc. being less than in other communities. The rate of Catholic people who are convicted is also low. However, domestic violence, adultery and divorce still exist among Catholic

families and are a big concern of the Church. One of the issues high on the discussion agenda of the Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, popularly referred to as the Synod on the Family, held in the city of Vatican in October 2014 and themed on family affairs, was divorce. Dealing with family issues, many parishes in Vietnam have updated the contents of catechesis and pre-Cana classes. A marriage prep course does not only include conversations on faith and knowledge of the doctrine or an understanding of marriage as a sacrament, but also covers life skills for young couples. Such courses educate followers to be both loyal followers to their faith and good citizens who counter well against social evils. That is further consolidated with church attendance, getting advice from confession boxes, participating in meditation courses, visiting the Blessed Sacrament, welcoming parish priests for their private visits etc.

The reinforcement of the family base, which begins from the spirit of filial piety of Catholic people, has a significant meaning in forming and shaping human characters and behaviours in their family relationships. When one fulfils duties towards parents, he or she surely has a good base to fulfil duties towards their spouses and children. Filial piety to parents also creates necessary qualities such as sacrifice, patience and respect to others. Those who are not pious to their parents and not willing to love and sacrifice for their spouses and children can hardly love and sacrifice for other people. Those who are truly pious to their parents are often more easily to be educated. Most of children who have good

education from their families later become good citizens.

3. Harmony/peace/concord to people and society

“Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword” [5, Vol.26, p.52]; “If anyone slaps you on the right cheek, turn to them the other cheek also” [5, Vol.5, p.39]; “Give to the one who asks you, and do not turn away from the one who wants to borrow from you” [5, Vol.5, p.42] are all words taken from the Bible.

These words express a clear viewpoint from the Bible that followers should not give up to the evil but must counter it by the way of being “like sheep among wolves” [5, Vol.10, p.3], using the power of love to convert the evil. In the Bible, Jesus Christ’s hard life was described as a struggle for life, peace and harmony and countering the evil based on the thought that the evil cannot be defeated by other evils. If one opts for that way, one will be subdued by the evil. Saint Paul once said: “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” [5, Vol.12, p.21].

The above Catholic viewpoint on handling the evil and the bad is thought by some to be utopian as it is too good to be true. The Catholic way of sending out sheep among wolves is seen by them as useless when crimes and social evils are still increasing day by day. Even a number of Catholic people fail to practice the way. The facts make some people doubt the capacity of harmony/concord, and choose

the use of force to fight against the evil and crimes.

In Vietnam, alarming nowadays is the situation of moral degradation and wrongful behaviours. Murders have happened continually, causing panic, with the age of criminals getting increasingly younger and their behaviours crueller and crueller. Despite major efforts by legal enforcement agencies, crimes have not been pushed back. There appear even new types of crimes, some of which are cross-border/transnational.

Children in conflict with laws are often those lacking a strong family base or are not enough educated and managed by their families. They may also have suffered from gaps in the education for a good personality and for the knowledge of ethics and laws, which is to be received from schools and the society. They may have been influenced by bad friends or lived in too complicated neighbourhoods while they are immature, experiencing a lot of psychological and physiological changes, loving to rebel, to explore and to show off. They are not yet able to define correctly the values of the truth, the goodness and the beauty, so when receiving negative influences from the society and friends, they might take wrong directions in thinking and acting, and easily have bad and extreme behaviours or commit crimes. Psychologists and criminologists have seen that the causes of juvenile crimes include a lack of education and an imbalance between economic development and comprehensive human development, and as a result, individuals are too weak to deal with the negative and swiftly changing surrounding environments.

To cope with the situation, many solutions have been implemented, including the provision of courses on laws and ethics, life skills and social standards, as well as the adjustments to the legal system for the suppression and deterrence of crimes...

Law and sanctions/punishments have been seen as necessary and valuable in educating people in line with the saying "spare the rod and spoil the child." Some educationists consider the removal of punishments from education to be "false humanism". In the Middle Ages, criminals were beheaded or burnt in public. Even today, beheading and stoning to death are still seen in some countries. The ways of punishment were deemed to prevent people from committing crimes, bringing about fears, hoping they would feel too frightened or ashamed to commit. However, on the one hand, the punishments can satisfy the crowd with the sentences carried out, but, on the other hand, the latter's curiosity of the crimes was also gratified. Therefore, instead of being deterred from offences, one gets to know more clearly and somehow "suggested" in relation to that. In addition, to be shown in public brings shame to the punished as well as their relatives. Over one hundred countries have abolished the death penalty for humane reasons. The Catholic method of sending out sheep among wolves, similarly, is aimed at refraining from the use of violence or challenging the aggressive wolves to "activate" their bellicosity though they deserve to be destroyed. Educating people to obtain values of the truth, the goodness and the beauty needs to be based on exploring their voluntarism and self-

consciousness of human dignity, so that they can lead lives like that of a real man. Goodness cannot be multiplied from punishment made against the evil and the bad in a public and vengeful manner, and/or as cruelly as criminals do. Education is eventually a way for people to be elevated on the ladder of civilisation, which is opposite to cruelty. Fighting against the evil should be based on moral standards and religious commandments rather than on prejudices and feuds. Thus, an educationist, a judge, a law enforcement officer, or even a saint, all need to believe in the seed of goodness, which is a human nature. Without that belief, when faced with the evil, punishments could be meaningless, bringing about hardly any results or hopes for the fact that human behaviours can be changed and the seed of goodness can germinate. Not only fanaticism, but also atheism and extreme political conservatism can be reasons triggering the evil.

The world has been shocked by terrors such as the attack happening on the French National Day last July, when a truck driver killed numerous innocent people happily celebrating the day. Some say that the West was paying for their intervention and imposition of Western religious values on Middle East Islamic nations that have not had friendly attitudes to the values. Terrorists in the name of the self-declaring Islamic State (IS) possess a “weapon” which is very difficult for the world to neutralise - radicalisation, which is in the meaning of becoming extremist. That is the result of the deep resentment of being driven to the wall, against Western politicians who are

accused of, though calling for not boycotting Islamic people, failing to discontinue the discrimination against Islamic immigrants in their countries.

4. Conclusion

Harmony is a natural emotion of human beings. Theories on harmony/peace/concord are used to reinforce human feelings and raise their awareness so that they naturally obey ethical standards and rules and turn the standards and rules into good habits. If people are educated with the dogma of harmony in a continual and regular manner and in diverse forms, they will better their consciousness, obtaining the meanings, and, as a result, willingly adjust their behaviours. The thinking/theory/tenet of harmony is not merely for religious followers, but for all. The way of being harmonious is not a cold, strict and ascetic path or a path specifically for religious followers. It should be considered a value to be complied with as a spiritual demand, and a firm belief somehow resembling a religious one. If harmony is learnt and practiced with a sense of devotion and sacrifice like those of religions, and checked sincerely and strictly and with repent, as done in religions, the goodness and the truth in real life would be more expanded than the evil and the bad. Man cannot forgive the evil but he needs to multiple the goodness and tolerance, so that the weaker and disadvantaged will not be driven to become extremists and fall into the darkness of hatred and cruelty.

It is very difficult for a society without a firm foundation of ethics and harmony/

concord to succeed in the development of a humane economy, a humane political system and as a humane society.

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