

Ethics of Jesus in Addressing the Challenges Facing Human Life

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Introduction

Our contemporary society is in the appealing need of moral values more than it needs material things. The moral values constitute of a steppingstone which can help adequately man of today to approach and solve his material problems effectively. In case the problems of ethical values are neglected, our society will always suffer from misunderstanding of its basic needs and the solutions which will be reached to the problems of material order will be misleading. Jesus' ethics is all about hope; it tells us: take courage and rise, he is calling you. Therefore, obedience of the ethics of Jesus requires placing faith in Him because his ethics is solely grounded on respect and defence of life in all its aspects. This article intends to describe the ethics of Jesus which can guide man along the journey of his existence.

Supremacy of Human Life over Obedience of the Laws

Laurent Magesa says: "*Human dignity is intrinsically grounded in respect of human rights of every individual and these human rights are God given privileges and they entail duties.*"¹ Ethics of Jesus is against hypocrisy which turns down dignity of a human person. Fundamentally, the ethics of Jesus is for life. Therefore, Jesus is against hypocrisy of the Pharisees, the Scribes and the elders who undermine the duty of addressing the issues related to human life on account of dogmatic religiosity and obedience of the laws. The Ethics of Jesus takes human life as a standard of everything. The ethics of Jesus is a call for the respect of the dignity of a human person who must be treated as the rule to measure the soundness of human actions. When we pretend to do something good we should think how it will

¹ Laurent Magesa, *Christian Ethics in Africa*. Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2002, p. 67.

bring happiness in our lives and the lives of our fellow human beings. The ethical attitude of Jesus was pro life; Jesus defended life in all its forms. Jesus asked the Pharisees if it is allowed on the Sabbath day to save the life of human being or to let him die.² Jesus, was an advocate of human rights in a very wonderful way, he rebuked those who pretended to practice the traditions marginalizing and dehumanizing those who were weak. Thus, the ethics of Jesus shows that we must always make a rigorous evaluation in order to give priority to human life instead of blindly obey the laws on the detriment of our fellow human beings.

In rebuking hypocrisy, Jesus shows us an ethical conduct which calls us to stand for our brothers and sisters without fear whenever they need our assistance. Sometimes we fear to show up and help those who are in need. This fear is motivated by many things but it is fundamentally based on hypocrisy. Jesus calls us to overcome this hypocrisy and break with all traditional ties which hinder us to go out in order to meet and to help our fellow human beings. We must be pro life as Jesus was in a way that we should stop all our activities in order to save lives of our neighbors. We must take courage and rise up in order to speak out against various forms of violating life on ground like abortion, euthanasia, sterilization, etc. Ethics of Jesus requires courage of getting rid of fear of those who may oppose the actions of mercy and love in order to save life of any human being.

Love

Love is the foundation of ethics of Jesus. Jesus said that any good deed that we perform to the little ones is done to him.³ With this serious instruction, Jesus reminds us a commandment which is above all commandments: love your brother as you love yourself.⁴ In Kantian categorical imperatives this can be understood as: treat humanity as an

² Mark 3, 4

³ Mathew 25, 40; Mathew 25, 45

⁴ Luck 10, 27; cfr also Lev. 19, 18.

end and not as means. The love that we show to our brothers and sisters is the measure of how we serve Jesus; the way we help those who are in need determines how we shall be judged; love is the standard measure to determine if the moral values we follow are justified; it is a way to be used in order to evaluate our moral performance.⁵ Jesus is love; love is his intrinsic essence. His entire ethics is based on love. Love of Jesus encompasses all his actions.

Love of Jesus is attractive. Being love, Jesus is the ultimate end to whom we should direct all our means. Jesus is the ultimate end at whom all human beings should aim because the perfect happiness is found in Him. This is to say that Jesus is the destination on which human beings should focus. Therefore, the ethics of Jesus teaches us to use things of this world as means which lead to Him. In other words, we should not be obsessed by material things; rather we should put priority on spiritual matters. In using material things, we should be reminded that they have a temporal value. We should use worldly things as means which direct to the absolute end which is Jesus Himself. In this particular matter, Jesus calls us to be detached from material things and set out for his mission as a mere pilgrim who has only a stick in his hand and one gown covering his body. In this way, the ethics of Jesus puts emphasis on material poverty in order to prevent the hearts of his disciples from being overloaded by the anxiety of accumulation of the worldly wealth and the jealous competition in pursuing vain glory and they forget to devotedly focus on the heavenly matters. The hearts of the disciples should be directed to Jesus Himself. This is what Saint Augustine affirms in saying that our souls are not at peace unless they find rest in God: "*For you have made us for yourself, Lord, and our heart is not at peace until it rests in you.*"⁶ We are created to make use of worldly things directing them to him.⁷ Jesus' ethics is based on the concept love. He told to his

⁵ Cfr Mathew 7, 2

⁶ Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, book 1, 1.

⁷ Luigi Bogliolo, op. cit. p. 149

disciples to love one another as He loved them.⁸ Love is the foundation on which He laid ethics. The ethics of Jesus commits each one of us to the service of love: “*if you love one another they shall know that you are my disciples.*”⁹ Then you said: “*Go and do the same*”.¹⁰ Ethics of Jesus is the ethics of love.

Human Dignity

Ethics of Jesus shows that He is absolutely prolife. Pope Paul VI said:

He is the good shepherd of humanity. There is no human value which he has not respected, elevated and redeemed. There is no human suffering which he has not understood, shared, and rendered precious. There is no human need that is not a moral defect which he has not taken on and endured in very person, and proposed to the spirit and understanding of other men as theme of interest and love, as though the condition of their very salvation. He had infinite compassion even for evil, which he, the doctor of humanity, knew and denounced with insuperable vigor, to the extent that by means of grace he caused ineffable springs of redemption and life to well up in the heart of man.”¹¹

Jesus came from heaven to the earth to defend life, to redeem life, to save it from the miseries and surrounding forms of death. Jesus said clearly that He is life.¹² Thus, following the principle of non-contradiction, we can say that Jesus cannot be life and act against life.

⁸ John 15, 12

⁹ John 13, 35

¹⁰ Luck 10, 37

¹¹ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, “*The Interreligious Dialogue, the Official Teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*” ed. by Francesco Gioia. Boston : Pauline Books & Media, 1994, p. 119

¹² John 14, 6

Jesus confirmed his identity of being life saying that He is a good shepherd who came to lay down his life for the sake of his lambs.¹³

Ethics of Jesus teaches to respect life; it lays a foundation of life as the guideline of moral values. This ethics is embraced in faith and lived in total obedience of divine commandments. It requires the Christians renouncing themselves and carrying their daily crosses.¹⁴ Thus, Christian ethics is demanding requires renouncing to the pleasures of the world. The Church was entrusted to be the bearer of the light of Jesus' ethics; the Church repeatedly teaches to respect life. The world needs this light because it is in darkness of human rights violation; the Church supports the promotion of human rights¹⁵; the Church teaches about morality centred on respect of human life; it teaches about human dignity and virtues of brotherly and social life.¹⁶

Furthermore, Jesus' ethics teaches to choose the moral values which promote life; it prohibits to kill or to let someone die.¹⁷ Jesus Christ came to take care of his people who were looking tired and discouraged like the sheep without a shepherd.¹⁸ Jesus' ethics is against any action that is opposed to life itself or whatever violates the integrity of the human person. This ethics is against any action which tends to treat men as mere tools for profit, rather than as free and responsible persons.¹⁹ The ethics of Jesus promotes human dignity. It

¹³ John 10, 11

¹⁴ Mark 8, 34

¹⁵ Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue, "*The Interreligious Dialogue, The Official teaching of the Catholic Church (1963-1995)*", op. cit, p. 57

¹⁶ Ibid, pp. 163-164

¹⁷ Mark 3, 4

¹⁸ Mathew 9, 36

¹⁹ The Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, no 27, cfr also The USA Catholic Bishops Testimony on Constitutional Amendment Protecting Unborn Human Life before the Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary, 07 March 1974, p.1

can be inferred from the ethics of Jesus that to kill someone is to usurp the divine authority of creation; every person is created in the image and likeness of God; and therefore, he has right to life. From these asserted premises, it can be logically deduced that the unborn is not an unjust aggressor to be killed or a parasite that has to be removed from the womb of the mother. The unborn is a human being from the very moment of conception²⁰; he has intrinsic right to life; he is sacred.²¹ The unborn is a special image and likeness of Jesus; we have to pay a particular attention to him. The unborn expresses the dignity of human person which must be respected. Jesus identified himself with those who are weak, undermined and neglected in our society to attract our attention so that we can care for you in those persons. We shall be judged considering how we have cared for Jesus through these weak and marginalized persons.²²

Jesus' ethics is all about life; it rejects whatever is against the preservation of human race in its dignity due to a human person. Therefore, it is easy to reasonably notice that lesbianism and homosexuality are wrong because they contradict life of the next generation. In the same context, the use of contraception is wrong because it contradicts life between the spouses and it can easily lead them to prostitution; the use of contraception tends to treat a human person as a mere object. Therefore, contraception is one of the barriers of procreation which is the primary end of marriage.

Freedom of Choice

Human beings are free to choose; human beings are primarily called to choose what is the best for them and for their salvation. Jesus

²⁰ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *On Respect for Human Life, Instruction Replies to certain Questions of the Day*. Nairobi : Paulines Publications Africa, reprint, 2005, p. 14

²¹ Pope Paul VI, the Encyclical Letter "*Humanae Vitae*". Nairobi : Paulines Publications Africa, 5th print, 2008, p. 12.

²² Mathew 25, 31-46

promised to send us the Holy Spirit who will guide us in the truth so that the choices we make our daily lives may please you. The parable of talents²³ shows that Jesus Christ entrusted free of charge to one of us the talents (good things) that we use with freedom of choice in order to sustain us in our lives but it happens that we misuse them. This parable shows that Jesus doesn't compel us to follow his ethics. Moreover, the parable of the prodigal son shows that we are free to remain with our Father or to leave Him.²⁴ This parable shows that one of the sons left freely his father and went away. Another parable shows that two sons who were sent to work in the field of their father one refused and later he changed his mind and another accepted but later he refused.²⁵ This parable shows that Jesus Christ does not force us to follow his ethics.

The Ethics of Jesus upholds "freedom of choice" of human beings. This freedom of choice leads us to the moral values not as Jean Paul Sartre and other atheists conceive them but in a way of "truth" that reveals the true nature of human being through right reason. Thus, the ethics of Jesus is based on the true identity of human being because Jesus is the truth.²⁶ Therefore, in the process of choice-making, Jesus guides us. He shows us the ethical way to follow; he conducts the Christians in the truth. Jesus is the mirror through which the Christians sees what is right and what is wrong because he is the truth and he cannot lie.

The Christians learn from Jesus the moral values which are right. Jesus directs us on our ways of making choices because he is essentially the way, truth and life. Therefore, Jesus is like an open book from which the Christians read what is the best for themselves and for others. In regard to freedom of choice that is an intrinsic characteristic of the

²³ Mathew 25, 14-30

²⁴ Luck 15, 11-32

²⁵ Mathew 21, 28-32

²⁶ John 14, 6

children of God, Jesus is the basic moral principle which shows to the Christians the measure of serving their brothers and sisters; He is the foundation on which the Christians build their lives in a manner that the waves and flood of moral relativism or moral anarchy cannot destroy them.

Morality of Jesus is one and eternal, it is universal and absolute, it brings life to those who choose to follow it, it is light and not heavy because Jesus Christ said that his burden is light. In crossroads of cultures, Jesus show us the morality to follow, the morality that highlights the culture of service and love, the morality that is opposed to the oppression and injustice, the morality that transcends the earthly values in order to aim at the eternal life. Therefore, ethics of Jesus Christ is transcendental because it goes beyond relative values caused by diversity of cultures. Ethics of Jesus is transcendental because it goes beyond space and time and therefore, this ethics is universal and eternal, it remains the same forever and ever. This is the reason why the Christians, in making choices, are very sure that they are following a right way which is traced in the heart of Jesus Christ Himself. The Ethics of Jesus comes from his heart of love without measure and it is printed in the conscience of the Christians. Thus, in following the ethics of Jesus Christ the Christians show obedience to their own conscience. However, they are not coerced to follow this ethics; they are free to choose to follow it or not bearing in mind that on the last day every person will be judged out of his actions.

Natural Law

The eternal law is the governance of God of all things in the universe. All things are governed by God.²⁷ Eternal law and natural law intermingle because divine wisdom manifests itself in how things strive to naturally achieve their respective ends. By his reason, a

²⁷ William E. May, *An Introduction to Moral Theology*. Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1991, p. 39

human being is naturally directed to what is good.²⁸ Jesus Christ's ethics is entirely based on natural law which expresses the natures and the ends of things to which they are directed. This means that in following the ethics of Jesus, the Christians must obey natures of things living in conformity with their fundamental laws which govern their basic behaviour. In this case, Jesus Christ's ethics reveals to human being how they must treat one another in order to preserve life. This ethics is teleological because it is based on the final cause of things which stress on how things develop in their respective stages until they reach their ultimate end. Given that the ultimate end of man is happiness, therefore, the ethics of Jesus Christ directs man to the way of searching for his happiness. Pope John Paul II says that the natural law is the truth revealed by the Spirit of God in order to defend and protect the values of marriage.²⁹ Moral values between the spouses should be preserved in the light of natural law. Apart from the sacred texts, natural law is the basic foundation of social catholic teachings; on basis of natural law the Church stands firmly to defend the respect of life at any of its stage.

The Church teaches: "*God has wisely disposed laws and rhythms of fecundity which, of themselves, cause a separation in the succession of births. Nonetheless the Church, calling men back to the observance of the norms of the natural law, as interpreted by its constant doctrine, teaches that each and every marriage act must remain open to the transmission of life.*"³⁰ The ethics of Jesus Christ highlights natural law which urges the Christians to transmit life as God called them to do so during the creation. Thus, the ethics of Jesus Christ is transmitted by the Church which wants the Christians to respect the values of human dignity in conjugal life. This is the reason why Jesus Christ teaches the Christians to respect the marriages of others and for these reasons he teaches them how to promote the values in conjugal

²⁸ Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, q. 94, art.2.

²⁹ Pope Paul VI, the Encyclical Letter "On Human Life", 18-19

³⁰ Ibid, 11.

love following the laws that are transmitted by the Church. In warning the people not to divorce, Jesus teaches the Christians to emulate fidelity and abstinence in conjugal life.

Jesus regarded things as they are directed to serve the unique end of eternal life because He always warned his disciple not to put too much their hope in earthly pursuits and wealth; rather the disciples should gaze their eyes on eternal kingdom of God. The natural law of Jesus promotes the values of human life as he showed us in healing the sick and raising the dead; it was incompatible with mosaic laws to touch a person suffering from leprosy but he breached this natural order and he healed many persons who were rejected because of this illness. Tissa states:

What Jesus is proposing are new values concerning society and social relationships. He is presenting a new attitude towards human life, a new culture in which the human person and service to him are a supreme concern. In this sense the message he brings from God is human-centred. It is different from the type of values prevailing in Jewish and Roman society which he contested. His teaching can be the basis of a permanent critique and contestation of hypocrisy, bigotry and selfishness which are inbuilt in human nature and consequently in human institutions.³¹

Jesus went beyond what was naturally conceived; for instance he sat with the sinners and women who were considered as inferior beings in comparison to men. Thus, the ethics of Jesus, prohibits all kinds of discrimination which was naturally legitimate.

Jesus rebuked dehumanization based on various forms of social injustice hidden in social and political institutions in order to pay

³¹ Tissa Bahasuriya, OMI. *Jesus Christ and Human Liberation*. Sri Lanka : A Centre for Society and Religion Publication, September, 1976, p. 54

attention to those were exploited and oppressed like the widow that He described in the Gospel of Luck who was denied her rights by a judge.³² The moral values of Jesus stress on human dignity that is a call addressed to each one of us to take care of the poor as it happened to the rich man and Lazarus.³³

Peace

Peace is a sine qua none condition of human existence. Without peace human life would be a hazard. This is the reason why there is no wonder that Jesus' ethics promotes peace and justice. Jesus said: "*happy are you the instruments of peace because you shall be called the children of God*".³⁴ The ethics of Jesus teaches the Christians that they must be the instruments of peace forgiving one another as He essentially teaches in the prayer of "Our Father". Peace was the central message of Jesus after his resurrection. When Jesus appeared to his disciples he told them: "*Peace be with you*"³⁵. Human life is possible if all human beings accept the message of one of the beatitudes which called them to be peacemakers.

Peace of Jesus is only possible if the Christians forgive one another. Thus, ethics of Jesus stresses on the virtue of forgiveness and reconciliation; it is the ethics which promotes unity and coexistence among his people. Our Father in heaven shall forgive us if and only if we forgive one another.³⁶ Love, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation are the core virtues that we can draw from the ethical teachings of Jesus. Without peace, human life will be impossible because the state of war of all against all will reign as Hobbes said in Leviathan; the stronger will eliminate the weaker.

³² Luck 18, 1-8

³³ Luck 16, 19-31

³⁴ Mathew 5, 9

³⁵ Luke, 24, 36.

³⁶ Mathew 6, 14-15

Conclusion

Ethics of Jesus is a steppingstone on which the Christians can rely to stand firmly and unshakably in refuting the erroneous opinions of moral anarchy based on the fact of denying natural law which is the basic foundation of Social Catholic Teachings. The denial of natural law has led some people to deny life in all its forms gravely violating the basic human rights of an unborn; it has led some people to offend the plan of God of procreation propagating marriages between the men and men and between women and women.

Ethics of Jesus teaches the respect of life. His ethics is the fountain of life from which the Christian can fetch the water of life. In following the ethics of Jesus, the Christians will have life in Him. If the Christians adopt another way of life which contradicts the ethics of Jesus they will face insurmountable challenges. Thus, Jesus' ethics is the light which shows the way of life; it directs to the eternal life which is the purpose of our pilgrimage on earth. The ethics of Jesus is the foundation of the conception of universal and objective moral principles. Thus, Jesus is the foundation of the values.

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