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Does the Roman Catholic Church’s Language of Sin Make Pastoral Care of Victims too Difficult?

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Introduction	2
A. Popular Beliefs vs. Catholic Teaching.....	3
1. Abortion.....	4
2. Contraceptives	5
3. Homosexuality.....	6
4. Celibacy vs. Sexual Abuse	7
B. Catholic Theological Currents	8
1. Struggle between Cross and Incarnation.....	8
2. Theology of the Incarnation.....	8
3. Theology of the Cross.....	9
C. Pastoral Language and Approaches	10
1. Pope Francis’ Pastoral Language.....	10
2. Language of God’s Love and Mercy	11
3. Paradoxical Language of God’s Love and Justice	12
4. Language of Sin and Liberation.....	12
D. Doctrinal Language and Pastoral Applications.....	14
Conclusion.....	17

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Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church in her over two thousand year old history has been effective in relating to people on fundamental questions of life and providing meaning to their lives. However, acknowledging that the church is both divine and human, it is pertinent that the church constantly opens up to the Spirit to be renewed and connected with ongoing concerns of the people of the time. This involves speaking the language of the people.

In order to speak the language that is most understandable to the people, the Second Vatican Council moved from the Latin dominated liturgy to the vernaculars. For instance, in 1965, the Second Vatican Council expressed the need to put “the Gospel at the service of common concerns,”² and to be much more meaningful to people:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which men ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.³

The above quotation from a pastoral document of the Second Vatican Council highlights a number of things that are pertinent to pastoral language in the Catholic Church: (a) the aim is on interpreting “signs of the times,” by making the Gospel much more meaningful, (b) the process is by rendering the message to a language that is intelligible to people, and (c) respond to the perennial questions concerning this life and the life to come.⁴ This is critical in the sense that the gospel is not just about the here and now but it has a spiritual side to it that goes beyond the here and now. Christian proclamation of the gospel must be conscious of this and focus on establishing God’s kingdom on earth “as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10).

In proclaiming the gospel and making it much more meaningful to the people, there arises the struggle between maintaining doctrinal purity and evolving good pastoral language for people in different

² Joe Tremblay, “Speaking the People’s Language,” *Catholic New Agency*, May 04, 2012, www.catholicnewsagency.com/column/speaking-the-peoples-language-2133/.

³ Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 4.

⁴ Tremblay, “Speaking the People’s Language.”

situations.⁵ There is a possibility that we as a church may be disconnected from the yearnings of a people, be misinterpreted or respond to our own questions, and not the questions of the people. Indeed, it is not too uncommon for members of the clergy, theologians and teachers to write for their colleagues or peers rather than the people they are meant to serve. Having been involved in a number of ministries and apostolates, I can tell that all the rank-and-file of Catholics have a hard time making heads or tails out of the average ecclesiastical documents or even papal encyclicals. As a result, they resort to what is oftentimes contrary to what the Catholic Church teaches namely, popular beliefs which tersely put, are sound bites and twisted presentations of the Church's message. This paper therefore argues that in order to explore the question, "does the Roman Catholic Church's language of sin make pastoral care of victims too difficult?" the first place to begin is by way of looking at what people believe about Catholic beliefs and what exactly the church teaches, perceived by some people as controversy.

A. Popular Beliefs vs. Catholic Teaching

There are certain teachings of the Catholic Church that have provoked opposition from the general culture in the western world. While these teachings are in line with the values from the global south (Asia and Africa) and Central America, as already noted above, they appear controversial in North America and Western Europe. This was evident at the synod on family that was concluded in Rome in October 2015. Some of these teachings border on issues of abortion, contraception, homosexuality, women's ordination, euthanasia, death penalty, and clergy sex abuse. This section highlights the four commonest ones that are always in the media and popular beliefs appear to be different from what really the official teaching holds about them. The aim is to assess to what extent the Catholic teaching has been understood in the first instance before interrogating the logic of pastoral language and doctrinal language. Four of the issues namely abortion, contraceptives, homosexuality and clergy sexual

⁵ See Joseph Bai, "One Reality Two Languages: The Relationship between Pastoral Language and Doctrinal Language," www.academia.edu/4147144/One_Reality_Two_Languages_The_Relationship_between_Pastoral_Language_and_Doctrinal_Language.

abuse will be examined below. We will place popular belief and Catholic teaching side by side on these issues.

1. Abortion

Popular Belief: The Catholic Church is against reproductive rights and discriminates against women by valuing the life of the child over the mother.

Catholic Teaching: Every human life is sacred and must be respected from the womb to the tomb. Human life begins at the very moment of conception and develops into maturity expectedly after a nine month period. “Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.”⁶ Understood in this way, even rape and incest are not grounds for abortion. What then are women who find themselves in these circumstances supposed to do? I will come back to this later in the work for there is provision for possible pastoral scenarios. For example, therapeutic abortions (for healing purposes) that do not directly target the life of the child are permissive in Catholic moral tradition.⁷ This often applies in cases of ectopic pregnancy or when expectant mothers are to undergo major surgeries. This means the doctors are not directly causing the death of a fetus.

By not directly causing the death of a fetus the church makes a distinction between causing death and allowing the process of certain death to continue to the end knowing fully that doctors cannot do the impossible. This example may clarify it. If a pregnant woman suffers a heart attack and a possible emergency surgery requires an anesthesia that would likely result into spontaneous abortion of the unborn fetus as a consequence of such medical procedure, it is still morally permissive to go ahead with the medical procedure. Here, it is the woman’s body that is doing the act of ejecting the fetus as an effect of the primary action (medical procedures) of the doctors who are trying to save both the lives of the mother and the fetus. There is no direct aim at ejecting the baby. So, when the baby dies naturally no sin is committed. On the other hand, if the doctors or nurses directly target and take the life of the baby may be for social or economic reasons,

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2271.

⁷ *Ibid.*, nos. 2274 & 2275.

that is considered murder, the taking of an innocent life. “Formal cooperation in an abortion constitutes a grave offense.”⁸

2. Contraceptives

Popular Belief: The Catholic Church is misogynist and controlling thereby dictating to families and women on what to do with their bodies. Women’s freedom is at stake!

Catholic Teaching: Catholic teaching situates sex within marriage and holds that sexual acts are to be opened to fertility (procreation).⁹ It further upholds the depth of human sexuality which includes procreation, education of children and mutual complementarity of spouses.¹⁰ The Catholic Church accepts family planning and encourages her members to do so. The Second Vatican Council teaches that couples should “thoughtfully take into account both their own welfare and that of their children, those already born and those which may be foreseen.”¹¹ The problem lies with the sort of family planning method that one wishes to undertake. The church favors natural family planning as against artificial family planning methods.¹² “A common purpose does not make morally equal all the possible means of achieving that same purpose.”¹³

One of the major grounds for non-acceptance of contraceptives like the pill is that they are *abortifacient*, i.e. they cause the uterus to eject potentially fertilized eggs or prevent their being fertilized. The Catholic Church believes that human life begins right from the first moment of conception and every person has the right to life. One cannot therefore value the life of one person over another. However, there are certain times that couples are in a dilemma and a tension might ensue. For example, what happens in HIV situations? A condom may be a possibility. According to Anthony Fisher, the archbishop of Melbourne in Australia, not all condom use results in contraception. A HIV-positive couple may use condoms to reduce the risk of HIV transmission during infertile periods without the intention

⁸ Ibid., no. 2272.

⁹ Ibid., no. 2271.

¹⁰ Ibid., no. 2332.

¹¹ Vatican II Council, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 50.

¹² Paul VI, *Humanae Vitae*, nos. 10 and 14.

¹³ Daniel Ude Asue, *Catholic Sexual Ethics and Tiv Women: A Case-study of Pastoral Practice in Regards to HIV/AIDS* (PhD. Dissertation, Miami, FL: St. Thomas University, 2012), 204.

of preventing conception.¹⁴ Pope Benedict made a similar pronouncement in regards to the usage of condoms by prostitutes in certain circumstances to prevent the transmission of HIV.

3. Homosexuality

Popular Belief: The Catholic Church is anti-gay, homophobic and is being discriminatory against homosexuals.

Catholic Teaching: The Catholic Church is not anti-gay but pro-traditional marriage. Catholic theology upholds the traditional understanding of marriage, which is between one man and one woman. Genital sex is only permissive within such a marital union aimed at procreation, education of children and mutual complementarity of spouses.¹⁵ Pope John Paul II specifically taught that sexuality is the means by “which man and woman give themselves to one another through the acts which are proper and exclusive to spouses.”¹⁶

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, however, does not support discrimination of homosexual persons. It rather teaches respect for homosexual persons and acknowledges that homosexuality is an experienced deep-seated tendency and inclination,¹⁷ which its psychological genesis is largely unexplained and may not be freely chosen.¹⁸ Since people are often not responsible for their inclinations (orientations) but only grow into an awareness of it, which “constitutes for most of them a trial. They must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity.”¹⁹

Gay rights movements decry the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*'s (no.2357) teaching on homosexuality as disordered and say it contributes to gay discrimination. But this is not the intent of the church. In common usage the word disordered suggests a breakdown, ailment or other related negativities, in a technical philosophical-theological context as used in the church's teaching it refers to the failure of a thing to “achieve fully or at all the goal to which it ought

¹⁴ Anthony Fisher, “HIV and Condoms within Marriage,” *Communio* 36, no. 2 (2009): 345.

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition, no.2332.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio*, no.11.

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition, no.2358.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, no.2357.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, no.2358.

to have been directed.”²⁰ The church’s use of the word disordered identifies among other forms of causalities, the final cause (i.e. a purposeful cause) which is concerned with the goal of human sexuality. “In this specific framework, Church teaching identifies the ultimate purpose of human sexuality as procreative, a rather remarkable conclusion that coincides with the conclusion of biological science.”²¹

The church sees depravity and disorder not only in homosexuality but also in masturbation because they do not attain the ultimate goal of human sexuality.²² This position connects a long Christian moral tradition that comes from a historical narrative of divine revelation: “All human sexuality shares a common history identified in faith with implications for life today. Revelation and faith tell us that human sexuality is created good, marked by sin, and, finally, redeemed in Christ.”²³

4. Celibacy vs. Sexual Abuse

Popular Belief: Mandatory celibacy is responsible for the sexual abuse among the Catholic clergy. And that sexual abuse is enormous among the rank and files of the Catholic clergy.

Catholic Teaching: Celibacy is freely undertaken by members of the clergy in the Latin rite,²⁴ and in the Eastern Churches “while bishops are chosen solely from among celibates, married men can be ordained as deacons and priests.”²⁵ Among the twenty three rites in the Catholic Church, only the Latin rite has mandatory celibacy which is never imposed but freely chosen. People still have an option of becoming Catholic priests under the Eastern rites. That being said, there is no specific studies at the moment that directly links pedophilia with celibacy. Majority of Catholic celibate priests have never abused children or adults, hence the imperative to avoid sweeping conclusions and acknowledge the moral integrity of this category in this regard. On the other hand the victims of priestly abuse

²⁰ Louis J. Cameli, *Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2012), 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd edition, no.2352.

²³ Cameli, *Catholic Teaching on Homosexuality*, 31.

²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 1579.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, no.1580

are to be treated with tenderness and not subjected to emotional torture.

From the foregoing, Catholic official teaching on such issues that overtly seem to vilify the sinner are not exactly as appear in popular beliefs. What then is the problem? Since doctrinal positions evolve out of theological strands, we turn to the theological thoughts that undergird Catholic theology.

B. Catholic Theological Currents

1. The Struggle between the Cross and the Incarnation

There is a struggle between the theology of the cross (contrast between world wisdom and divine wisdom) and a theology of the incarnation (sympathy to human values).²⁶ “As Christian anthropology resonates between finding self by sincere gift of self (GS #24), so also the two theologies resonate between Incarnation (finding self) and Cross (sincere gift of self).”²⁷

2. Theology of the Incarnation

The theology of the incarnation focuses on God breaking into the world: “and the word became man and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). In giving an account of the Christian revelation there is emphasis on the humanity of Jesus. Christian revelation believes that Jesus, the Christ was truly human and God. On how best to understand this has been a source of tension in Christian history. The Council of Nicea (325) upheld the doctrine of the Trinity and taught that Jesus as the Son is one in being (*ousia* - subsists) with the Father (*homo-ousios* – consubstantial).²⁸ The Council of Ephesus (431) clarified that Christ has two natures (divine and human), and is truly and fully divine and human; and therefore Mary is the Mother of God (*theotokos*). The Council of Chalcedon (451) affirmed the two natures in Christ but the existence of only one Person who is divine. “The Council of Constantinople III (680-681) preferred to speak of the human nature

²⁶ James C. Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought, Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), 262.

²⁷ Robert A. Connor, “The Truth will make you Free,” Personal Blog, April 07,2009, <http://robertaconnor.blogspot.com/2009/04/theology-of-incarnation-theology-of.html>.

²⁸ Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ, “*Ousia* and *Hypostasis*: The Cappadocian Settlement and the Theology of ‘One Hypostasis,’” in *The Trinity: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Trinity*, Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, & Gerald O’Collins, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 99-122.

dynamically in terms of the human will, but that the protagonist of that dynamism is not the will but the divine Person. Hence, both the human and the divine will form one ‘Yes’ that is the ‘Yes’ of the Person.”²⁹ The essence of this brief doctrinal survey is to bring forth the importance of the human will in our response to the gospel. In looking for a language for pastoral formulation Catholic theology must take into cognizance this fact which includes good strategies for the conversion of the human will. Often, those who emphasize the human nature moving towards divinity (God) tend to be sympathetic to the failings of people as part of being human. While it is acceptable, excess emphasis on failing humanity without taking into cognizance the human will and freedom excuses all failings and leaves a person with no responsibility. Take away freedom and responsibility and you kill humanity!

3. Theology of the Cross

The theology of the cross is about the divine activity in human salvation and human response to God’s saving event. In the words of Benedict XVI: “the theology of the Cross is not a theory; it is the reality of Christian life....Christianity is not the easy road; it is, rather, a difficult climb, but one illumined by the light of Christ and by the great hope that is born of him....”³⁰ We are led to an awareness of who God is and how God saves us. Indeed God gives us divine graces by treating us not as we deserve but as God ought us to be. We as human with freedom and freewill need to cooperate with the graces of God. The theology of the cross opens us to the reality of “a dynamic, topical, anti-world conception of Christianity, a conception which understands Christianity not only as discontinuously but constantly appearing breach in the self-confidence and self-assurance of man and of his institutions, including the Church.”³¹ At no point are we to be self serving and conceited but accept our brokenness and beseech God’s throne of mercy. We are to accept ourselves as sinners before we could implore God’s mercy. “Whoever says he has no sin is a liar”

²⁹ Robert A. Connor, “The Truth will make you Free.”

³⁰ Benedict XVI as cited by the Prelate of Opus Dei, Javier, “Letter from the Prelate (April, 2009),” Opus Dei’s official website, <http://opusdei.org.au/en-au/document/letter-from-the-prelate-april-2009/>.

³¹ Benedict XVI [Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger], *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd Edition (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 170.

(1 John 1:10) and it is while we were sinners that Christ died to save us (Romans 5:8).

For good pastoral language, the two theologies must complement one another. “The two fundamental structural forms of ‘incarnation’ and ‘cross’ theology, reveal polarities which cannot be surmounted and combined in a neat-looking synthesis without the loss of the crucial points in each; they must remain present as polarities which mutually correct each other and only by complementing each other that they point towards the whole.”³² Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) decrying the overt tilt toward theology of the incarnation, for instance, urges the theology of the cross and challenges the direction of contemporary Roman Catholic theology as it seeks the path of *aggiornamento* after Vatican II Council. He sees elements of relativism in the ongoing discourse and argues against relativism “as a false interpretation of the ideological presuppositions”³³ of events in the modern world. For him, relativism robs faith of its claim to truth without providing a vision of human dignity while accepting pluralism as the interplay of church, society and politics. He rejects relativism and skepticism as opposed to truth and humanity’s bond to the truth. This is the pitfall he believes has plunged the church ever since Vatican II Council: truth is now personal, no one is wrong, sin is relegated to the background, and positive reinforcement is fast becoming the new god. How do we then fashion a language that takes into cognizance the two theologies and be countercultural but at the same time a good pastoral language?

C. Pastoral Language and Approaches

1. Pope Francis’ Pastoral Language

How then do we correct the deficiencies enunciated by Pope Benedict XVI in the preceding section? The papacy of Pope Francis has attempted a solution in this regard. Pope Francis has not changed doctrines but has simply taken the “mind your language” approach. For long, the official presentation of Catholic doctrines and pastoral documents are couched in long philosophical and abstract theological language that appears unintelligible to the ordinary folks thereby

³² Ibid, 171.

³³ Livingston et al., *Modern Christian Thought, Volume II: The Twentieth Century*, 263.

giving the secular world a monopoly on getting its message out and misrepresenting the church. There are a number of things that the church can do to make people hear and understand the message of the Church. It may require using simpler language and fewer words so that people receiving the message may not feel vilified by the message that is meant to give them salvation. Learning from Pope Francis, this paper proposes a critical incorporation of the following elements in the church's pastoral language.

2. Language of God's Love and Mercy

The language of God is love and is acceptable and encouraged in pastoral application. As stated by Pope Francis, the church is obliged to “proclaim mercy as God’s merciful love, revealed in the same mystery of Christ;” and we are likewise obliged “to have recourse to that mercy and to beg for it.”³⁴ However, the difficulty comes in when people are no longer challenged to change their lives. The gospel should challenge people to leave their comfort zones. Unfortunately enough, many people are increasingly “seeking the psychological comforts of religion without making sacrifices.”³⁵ Aside the tidbits one gets from the media that mischaracterize the Roman Catholic Church as being ‘hard,’ ‘rigid’ and ‘out of touch,’ one commentator says of the homilies that they are purely therapeutic.³⁶ This is turning the gospel into a jolly affair amounting to sentimentality and self-satisfaction which cannot be the hallmark of Christian life. As Paul would encourage young Timothy as bishop of Ephesus: “proclaim the word; be persistent whether it is convenient or inconvenient; convince, reprimand, encourage through all patience and teaching” (2 Timothy 4:2). Mercy without repentance is cheap grace. Thus John Paul II puts it this way: “mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and draws good from all the forms of evil existing in the world and in man. Understood in this way, mercy constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of His mission.”³⁷

³⁴ Francis, *Misericordiae Vultus*, no.11.

³⁵ Rod Dreher, “I’m Still Not Going Back to the Catholic Church,” *Time*, September, 23, 2013, <http://ideas.time.com/2013/09/29/im-still-not-going-back-to-the-catholic-church/>.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 6.

3. Paradoxical Language of God’s Love and Justice

God is loving and merciful but at the same time God is just, and calls us to repentance. As echoed in the magnificat, God’s “mercy is from age to age on those who fear him” (Luke 1:50). This is not instilling intimidating fear in people but sparking a sense of awe that gives rise to reverential fear (the worship of God and true repentance). There is a difference between contrition and attrition in Catholic theology. Contrition means someone is truly sorry for a sin (remorseful) and is ready to change. Attrition is the acknowledgement of sin and sorrow over it without being ready to change. Since Christianity is geared towards a change of heart to become a better disciple, Catholic theology cherishes a good act of contrition over attrition. As Pope John Paul II taught, the tragedy of the modern world is the loss of the sense of sin which blocks us from seeking repentance.³⁸

4. Language of Sin and Liberation

One of the underlying metaphors in the Roman Catholic use of language in relation to freedom is to be understood: ‘captives need to be liberated from sin.’ At the onset of his papacy, Pope Francis called for a church of mercy by urging us to get people on the margins into the mainstream. He calls the church a field hospital where the wounded can be treated. At the same time the pope’s teaching on divine mercy needs to be properly understood. Employing the pope’s hospital and cure metaphors, one would say the nature of the cure on offer in the “church’s hospital” needs to be discerned. For instance, “Anesthesia is a kind of medicine that masks pain, but it’s not the kind of medicine that heals the underlying sickness.”³⁹ Conversion to God as the goal of the Christian life “is always the fruit of the ‘rediscovery’ of ... [God], who is rich in mercy.”⁴⁰ Thus John Paul II submits: “Authentic knowledge of the God of mercy, the God of tender love, is a constant and inexhaustible source of conversion, not only as a momentary interior act but also as a permanent attitude, as a state of mind.”⁴¹

³⁸ John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 18.

³⁹ Dreher, “I’m Still Not Going Back to the Catholic Church.”

⁴⁰ John Paul II, *Dives in Misericordia*, no. 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Henri de Lubac observes that modern ideologies have often created a neutral optimism that may be backed up by humanistic sciences which draws us away from the reality of sin to the point of making excuses from every wrong act we commit as human beings. The resultant attitude is an attempt to couch reality (especially of sin) in a language that emasculates such reality but does not advance personal spirituality. Authentic Christianity draws us into a relationship with God and fellow human beings. On the other hand, modern ideologies at times make us want to dance away from this relationship and rather focus on adapting to secular interlocutors to comfort our consciences. In this process we want to make sin appear palatable and tolerable. We need not be obsessed with the question, “How shall we present the idea of sin so that it may be credible?”⁴² One does not need to be a Christian to know that sin is inherent in human condition. The good news is that the weaknesses of the human condition and the evil ingrained in human condition have been conquered in Christ.⁴³ Jesus Christ did not shy away from preaching the austere nature of the gospel. However, he brought sin and grace side by side. St. Paul would put it this way, “despite the increase of sin, grace has far surpassed it” (Romans 5:20).

Christians are to be watchful of the emerging form of pharisaism that does not want to hear the words of pardon and reconciliation. While constant repetition of mercy is acceptable and praised it should not emasculate the growing revolt against the mention of the word sin. The words of Jesus “neither do I condemn you” are echoed but the remaining part of “go and sin no more” are deliberately omitted. People condemn sin everywhere and everyday but no one wants to own up. Once people are reminded of personal sins they revolt and the focus is on social sins which are embedded in structures. Who are then those behind these structures in society? While commending those who look forward towards collective salvation there is again the danger of a Christian misrepresentation of the general salvation of the world: the salvation attained in Christ has a personal touch. It is not just the sins that happen in society but how we personally partake in

⁴² Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, trans. Brother Richard Arandez, F.S.C. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 130.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 131-133.

them both by omission or commission matters.⁴⁴ Pope John Paul II puts it thus:

We cannot however forget that conversion is a particularly profound inward act in which the individual cannot be replaced by others and cannot make the community be a substitute for him. Although the participation by the fraternal community of the faithful in the penitential celebration is a great help for the act of personal conversion, nevertheless, in the final analysis, it is necessary that in this act there should be a pronouncement by the individual himself with the whole depth of his conscience and with the whole of his sense of guilt and of trust in God, placing himself like the Psalmist before God to confess: “Against you ... have I sinned [Psalm 50 (51):6].”⁴⁵

This then means that in drawing out the pastoral language of sin the social effects of sin cannot triumph the personal guilt and effects that sin imputes. At the same time there is need to balance up the doctrinal language with the pastoral language so that the sinner will not shy away from what is supposedly the gospel but he/she is challenged to embrace repentance and the cross that goes with it. How do we go about that?

D. Doctrinal Language and Pastoral Applications

The difficulty of pastoral application of language consists in putting forth doctrinal statements that give people the meaning of what is taught. When you engage people on Catholic doctrines, it becomes evident that many people lack (a) a clear knowledge of what the doctrines themselves teach. There are so many mischaracterizations that show (b) the lack of knowledge of what is not said, and there is also (c) the poor interpretations of existing knowledge of the doctrines as they are being taught.

Many people tend to misrepresent the church based on what the church does not say, not by what the church does, which may seem like an argument from the silence of the church. This often applies to discussions on abortion. For instance, the official teaching of the Catholic Church does not accept abortion in whatever form including therapeutic abortion, nevertheless, it is permissive when the life of the mother is in danger and the abortion is not directly willed. The same can be said of rape. During the 2012 elections in USA this was a big

⁴⁴ Ibid., 134-138.

⁴⁵ John Paul II, *Redemptor Hominis*, no.20.

issue that raised a problematic for the Catholic Church in spite of the fact that the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* describes rape as an “intrinsic evil” and an offence against the sixth commandment with grave consequences.⁴⁶ Thus the U.S. Catholic Bishops’ *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services* states that, “A woman who has been raped may defend herself against a conception resulting from sexual assault.”⁴⁷ Catholic theology does not oblige a raped woman to allow the natural potential for conception to take its course as it is the case in consensual sex. “The forced introduction of sperm is an act of aggression she may resist even through means that prevent the creation of new life.”⁴⁸ Granted that many rape treatments recommend anti-fertility medications within seventy two hours that cover several days, Catholic theology encourages victims to seek help within twenty four hours to prevent pregnancy. “The emphasis is on stopping ovulation. Therefore, care should be taken to avoid abortion in the process of preventing pregnancy during rape. Even though drugs like Ovril may inhibit ovulation there are many contraceptives that affect the endometrium of the uterus resulting into an expulsion of an already conceived ovum.”⁴⁹ At this stage, the expulsion of an already conceived ovum becomes an abortion which is unacceptable practice in Catholic moral teaching.⁵⁰ “Here, there should be reasonable certainty that ovulation has not taken place and is not about to occur.”⁵¹ As briefly discussed the main problem in understanding Catholic doctrines at times comes from what is not said rather than what is even said. Church officials should try to explain much more than the simple headlines they throw out thereby giving room to misinterpretations.

Granted the doctrinal language of the church is couched in high sounding philosophical and theological jargons, pastoral/practical

⁴⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 2356.

⁴⁷ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Care Services*, 36.

⁴⁸ [Massachusetts Catholic Conference, “Emergency Contraception,” accessed on February 27, 2014, http://www.macatholic.org/emergencycontraception.](http://www.macatholic.org/emergencycontraception)

⁴⁹ Daniel Ude Asue, “Sexual Violence, Contraceptives Use, and the Principle of Self-Defense in Marriage,” *Hekima Review* no. 50 (2014), 119.

⁵⁰ Vatican II, *Gaudium et Spes*, sec. 51.

⁵¹ Asue, “Sexual Violence, Contraceptives Use, and the Principle of Self-Defense in Marriage,” 119.

theologians should do a much better job of contextualizing and applying the message. We are not talking about toning down the message but meeting people where they are pastorally and not just meeting them but as much as possible in their everyday language. Today's culture is saturated by media sound bites and an average person does not have the time to reflect on abstract theological truths that may appear a bit dry and not directly related to the daily circumstances and needs of a tension filled society. The continuous use of abstract language in ecclesial communications does no justice to the gospel or recipients who are yearning to hear words of consolation and hope in the midst of stressful living.

One of the criticisms against papal encyclicals and ecclesiastical documents is that they are thick voluminous readings. Added to this is that they are often specialized writings that require the quintessence of experts to devour them. In the long run, one might say the aim of spreading the gospel is truncated since these documents are not easily discernible by the average person in the pew or on the street. In this regard the efforts of Pope Francis are commendable since his encyclicals are stripped of exotic language but with simple theological finesse. At the same time, they are still lengthy. For instance, the most recent papal encyclical, *Laudate Si* by Pope Francis has 40,859 words long (including footnotes). “However, St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans is a little over 9,000 words. Even as the inspired Word of God, this New Testament document is rarely read from the first to the last chapter by Catholics.”⁵² The implication is that church documents reached a limited audience and rarely do average Catholics read them or are other people able to do so. These documents “may appeal to the clergy, professors and theology enthusiasts ...but...do not accommodate the average person trying to get through a busy day. Perhaps, this is one of the reasons why we are losing people to the world; they just don’t understand what we are saying nor do they have time to read what we have to say.”⁵³ We have the challenge then of bringing the language to everyday language and how easily such doctrines would be applied in complex situations.

⁵² Tremblay, “Speaking the People’s Language.”

⁵³ Ibid.

Conclusion

The doctrinal positions of the Catholic Church are perfect but the pastoral language that is often used is very technical and removed from the everyday language of the people. The unfortunate result is that Catholic teaching is often misrepresented. The church is known for what it does not teach rather than for what it teaches. Some even misconstrue media sound bites to be the official teaching of the church. To address this, theologians need to balance the theology of the incarnation and the theology of the cross that undergird Catholic theological discourse. This approach may hopefully evolve a pastoral language that will be mindful of the context of the community in which a particular doctrine is being taught. This does not mean that doctrines be simply reduced to the cultures of people but rather pastoral language should include these as benchmarks: (a) the language of God's love and mercy, (b) the paradoxical language of God's love and justice; and (c) the language of sin and liberation. This does not mean we simply make people feel good without pricking their consciences. Rather we should challenge them to repentance without dampening their spirits but raising their hopes for salvation in Jesus whose message carries both condemnation of sin and divine grace. This means redirecting our pastoral language from classical theological finesse to everyday theology. The language should be simple enough for an average person in the pew to relate to.



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