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**How may the treatment of the great ethical questions in both teaching and research
reveal the specific nature of a Catholic university?**

Anthropological aspects

Which ethical questions should be considered important? Even the choice of these questions reflects the accepted world value and it may be presumed that the Christian, especially Catholic vision of God, the world and man will essentially determine that selection. Therefore another question might have to precede the one in the title: "What ethical issues are important in the Catholic perspective?" One should, however, add two further statements. First, Catholic theology - unlike some Protestant views - respects the power of natural human cognitive abilities, including the capacity of evaluative knowledge. In this spirit, it is said that *Gratia non destruit naturam sed supponit et perficit eam*. And if so, then from Catholic perspective also that order of ethical questions which is quite widely accepted and not necessarily inspired by Christianity is of importance; it requires, though, to be complemented and deepened by Christian moral sensibility. Secondly, it may be presumed that the topic of my discussion is in particular concerned with the ethical issues that at present are considered vitally important. In this spirit the title question can be somewhat amended: "What is the approach to important ethical issues today in teaching and research that reflects the specific nature of a Catholic university?".

I have, however, to admit that I am not a sociologist, so the selection of the important current moral issues proposed below is inevitably of a subjective nature. I shall note three issues that, in my opinion, today afflict mankind particularly hard, and that are important from the point of view of the Christian vision of man. I assume that other authors can arrange differently this list of significant ethical questions.

Addressing these questions I will pay attention - again in accordance with the set theme - especially to their anthropological foundation, and more specifically to how academics and scholars representing Catholic universities should consider these issues in their research and teaching practice. Of course, I consider the following suggestions as a starting point for further discussion; the subject is too important and difficult, to be able to contain in a

short paper all that is essential in this matter. I do not have to state that all of these problems may only be signalled in my brief presentation.

1. Human life: the sanctity *versus* quality

The attitude to human life is a particular test to verify the meaning of commonly proclaimed humanistic declarations. Life, understood simply as biological existence, is not yet another worth "next to" other assets of value for humans. Only when alive can one achieve such goods as wealth, power or knowledge. A man can give his own life in an act of heroic love, as is particularly clearly showed by Jesus Christ and martyrs who followed His example. But the gift of self may only be offered by a man who "has" a life and therefore it is at his disposal. In this sense, life is the foundation of all other values, and respect for it is the first word of love of the neighbour. Consequently, for centuries the murder of an innocent human being was considered a crime that deserved severe punishment. This principle is confirmed and deeply founded in the light of Christian revelation as it points to the prospect of human salvation offered to man by God after the earthly pilgrimage.

The conviction of the *sanctity* of human life thus understood is opposed to the more widespread outlook today, according to which the value of life is measured by its *quality*. To be more specific: by the abilities, which a human being has at the moment and goods, which one may still attain on this earth. This opinion is an expression of naturalistic *secularism* which limits a human being, the meaning of his life and prospects for development within the mundane world (within *hoc saeculum*). The pride of place belongs to an utilitarian account of goods achievable in this world, which is to justify - or not justify - continuation of life. This option, of course, undermines the right to life of the human being who is not able to achieve any values either because he has not yet reached the appropriate level of development or because serious illness deprives him of the opportunity, and the calculus of goods anticipates a significant dominance of losses over the benefits. Thus, a climate develops conducive to the acceptance and legalization of abortion and euthanasia.

This naturalistic secularism poses of course a big challenge for the Catholic universities, recalled by Pope John Paul II in his Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*. He stresses that in the great work to build a new culture of human life, "A special task falls to Catholic intellectuals, who are called to be present and active in the leading centres where

culture is formed, in schools and universities, in places of scientific and technological research, of artistic creativity and of the study of man."¹ These words contain in a nutshell the program of tasks entrusted to us. Catholic scholars should undertake research within the biological sciences that will allow to show more clearly the organic unity of the dynamic development of the human being from conception to natural death. They also face philosophical issues, in particular those concerned with the human person and its dignity. Understandably, a Catholic university cannot lack theological reflection, showing the greatness and vocation of man in the context of Christian revelation.

Such a spirit of respect for human life should also permeate the educational activity pursued in Catholic universities. It is about the transmission of substantial knowledge and a thorough discussion of the views that undermine not only the teaching of the Catholic Church, but simply true humanism. It is also about the education of students to respect every human being, about building a culture of mutual relations, so that young people are more able to see how valuable a man is for what he is as a person and not just for what he "has", not only by his abilities and achievements, social functions performed, etc. This is a difficult task and one that must be implemented in a variety of activities, what is important however is that the Catholic university should be a centre of high humanistic culture that helps to discover and duly respect every human being, every human life.

2. The social question: the rich *versus* the poor

As the result of scientific and technical progress humanity today has far more wealth than it ever did in the past. But not everyone can multiply his/her prosperity and opportunities of personal and social development to the same extent. Rather on the contrary, the rich are becoming richer, the poor get into more and more misery. The gap between the rich and poor is increasing in different countries, but it is especially dramatic as seen on a global scale. "The abundance of goods and services available in some parts of the world, particularly in the developed North, is matched in the South by an unacceptable delay, and it is precisely in this

¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae*, p. 98.

geopolitical area that the major part of the human race lives" writes John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*.²

He also emphasizes that this widening gap, finding its expression in the colloquial speaking of the First World, the Second World, the Third World and at times even the Fourth World, violates the unity of the world, the unity of the human race³. This unfair distribution of wealth is of course a threat to world peace, and it can also be the source of terrorism, which has grown to a size unknown in past centuries. Finally, it must be noticed that the material poverty reduces significantly the cultural development of the affected people, their intellectual potential, creative abilities, etc. The Pope, however, also draws attention to the fact that the serious global problem is not only of underdevelopment destroying a large part of humanity, but also of “ (...) super-development, which consists in an excessive availability of every kind of material goods(...)” This super-development “(...) easily makes people slaves of >possession< (...) This is the so-called civilization of >consumption< or >consumerism< (...)”⁴.

At the core of consumerism and the whole economic system oriented above all to get rich lies a certain version of an *anthropological error*. The Pope points to the error with respect to this type of socialism which was implemented in the countries belonging to the so-called socialist bloc⁵, but this error can also be found in countries with capitalist economy. In both these economic and political regimes, a man is reduced to the aspect of possession, with the difference that in the countries of the so-called socialist camp a man was subjected to the interests of the state (which leads to totalitarianism), while in capitalist societies the right of every human being to multiply their assets is emphasized. That brings the threat of individualism and treatment of other people not as neighbours but as competitors in the race to acquire consumer goods, too slight (despite the wealth of the world) to satisfy the insatiable appetites of those who in consumption only find their own value. In the Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II emphasizes that the problem of alienation is still valid, despite the failure of socialism inspired by Marxism. “Even if the Marxist analysis and its

² John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, p. 14.

³ Ibidem.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 28.

⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus*, p. 13.

foundation of alienation are false, nevertheless alienation — and the loss of the authentic meaning of life — is a reality in Western societies too. This happens in consumerism, when people are ensnared in a web of false and superficial gratifications.”⁶

What are the tasks hence for Catholic universities? Above all, a critical analysis of the anthropological error mentioned above. As long as man is understood as a consumer of goods and his greatness is seen in the "to have" dimension, the perspective of mutual rivalry will continue to be dominant in the shape of a "rat race " to achieve the maximum multiplicity of consumer goods. Christian and, indeed, deeply humanistic perspective of development of the human person, was particularly beautifully expressed in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* : “(...) man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself.”⁷

To reveal and develop this perspective of growth of the human person seems to be a special task for Catholic scholars. This is not only a Christian perspective; it is recalled by many authors not inspired by the Judeo - Christian revelation (to mention only the drama of Sophocles *Antigone* , where the heroine confesses “*Tis not my nature to join in hating, but in loving*”⁸ and Aristotle’s beautiful reflections on friendship⁹). However, Jesus Christ through His teachings and the act of redemption accomplished on the cross, and crowned by a mystery of the resurrection, deeply and clearly demonstrated this dimension of a man’s greatness which finds realization in the aspect of "neighbour " and not a " rival" . This is the appropriate context to recall the thesis expressed by Pope Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Deus caritas est*, which was hardly noticed even by Catholic commentators. Usually we consider two conditions as being critical in belonging to the Catholic Church: faith in the truth professed by the Church (the dogmas) and participation in the sacramental life. Pope Benedict writes though: “The Church's deepest nature is expressed in her three-fold responsibility: of proclaiming the word of God (*kerygma-martyria*), celebrating the sacraments (*leitourgia*), and exercising the ministry of charity (*diakonia*). These duties presuppose each other and are inseparable. For the Church, charity is not a kind of welfare activity which could equally well

⁶ Ibidem, p. 41.

⁷ Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, p. 24.

⁸ Sophocles, *Antigone*, epeisodion II.

⁹ Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, book VIII and IX.

be left to others, but is a part of her nature, an indispensable expression of her very being”¹⁰. This means that just as we do not recognize as a Catholic someone who challenges the teaching of the Church, or who does not participate in the sacramental life, so one who does not participate in the ministry of love cannot be considered a member of the Church.

It is worth to recall this truth and to develop its sense. This is not an isolated voice of one of the popes. In the passage cited from his Encyclical Letter Benedict took up the thought of the Second Vatican Council, expressed especially in the Constitutions *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, as well as the conviction of John Paul II that "man is the way of the Church"¹¹, which must find their extension in building the imagination of charity¹². Catholic scholars working in Catholic universities should also participate in shaping the political culture of the modern world. The Catholic Church does not favour any particular political party, nor does it propose any ideal political-economic system, but its role is critical reflection on the political programs which are implemented in the modern world¹³. Catholic scholars cannot therefore exclude themselves from the discourse, which aims to build a more human world, including the insistence for justice, recognition and standing up for today's most disadvantaged people and social groups.

This very sensitivity needs to be developed among students of Catholic schools. Lectures and other classes should serve this purpose, but we cannot stop there. There is a need in Catholic universities to inspire and support all initiatives that allow to wake up and strengthen the sense of responsibility for building a better world, which the graduates of these schools will enter as members of a social and cultural elite. We must therefore support volunteering, involvement in various forms of charity, a sense of responsibility for the society in which in some sense our students should become leaders. It also seems that one of the tasks that face the professors of Catholic universities is to overcome the individualistic mentality where the focus of attention is only on one's future career rather than the prospect of personal development, which opens up through the achievement of the common good.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus caritas est*, p. 25.

¹¹ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis*, p. 13. Cf. also idem, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus annus*, p. 53.

¹² Idem, Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio ineunt*, p. 50.

¹³ Cf. Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*, Part II, Chapter III and IV.

3. Freedom and truth. Realism *versus* relativism

The question of the relationship of freedom to truth is not among the ones commonly referred to as major ethical issues of the modern world. Yet, if you carefully look at the disputes pending around different topics, it is hard not to notice that what determines the outcome is rather the right of being forceful more than the force of being right. After a period of fascination with the possibilities of the human mind, which was very strong especially during the Enlightenment, came the time of postmodernism, one feature of which is to doubt the cognitive capabilities of the human mind, and even regard truth as oppressive to human freedom. And if you deny the human mind the capacity to know objective and morally binding truths (idealism, widespread in contemporary philosophy may be blamed for that), then only force remains as a decisive argument for the outcome of any dispute. Born of the doubt in the cognitive capacity of the human mind, relativistic mentality begins to creep into theological reflection, which John Paul II anxiously evoked in his Encyclical Letter *Veritatis splendor*. But this is not just a theological problem; such mentality changes the meaning of any dialogue that ceases to be a way to know the objective and morally binding truth. Instead, in a situation of conflict of interests strength becomes the decisive argument. Also faith is reduced in this way to the realm of emotions and experiences of a particular person, which another man may not experience. The missionary task of the Church is then reduced to stimulating the appropriate emotions, and not to responding to God who reveals himself stepping into human history and waits for the reaction of a man who is called upon by the revelation.

In this context, a particularly important task for Catholic scholars seems to be the defence of epistemological realism, the presentation of the supremacy of the human mind as capable of knowing the truth and showing its morally binding power, which opens up the possibility of dialogue with the world, especially the dialogue between faith and scientific knowledge (cf. Encyclical Letter *Fides et ratio*). Their involvement in this dialogue should be regarded as a particular challenge for Catholic scholars. We live in the so-called knowledge society and the absence of Catholic thinkers in this world would only ascertain a false belief that Catholic faith remained in the realm of the irrational options. This dialogue is not easy; scientific mentality still permeates the world of science, and within that mentality there is no room for questions about the meaning and ultimate dimension of human life. Overcoming this mentality, the defence of epistemological realism, showing of the relationship between the

scientific description of the world and the meaning and ultimate goal of life of the human person is a difficult task, requiring considerable skill and patience.

In the perspective of teaching it seems of particular importance to show the relationship - and not the opposition - between faith and human reason and its cognitive abilities, and to shape the rational attitude in that spirit that is – however - open to the truths beyond the world knowable through senses. The neglect of this effort leads to the promotion of fideism and religious fundamentalism, deeply at odds with recognition of the Catholic faith as seeking understanding (*fides quaerens intellectum*). A good graduate of the Catholic University will be the one who is open to academic achievements and is able to show their connection with the vocation of a man called to eternal life in Jesus Christ.

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Significant ethical issues are obviously more numerous. The problems caused by the process of globalization and issues of ecology might be evoked, the problem of global terrorism, only pointed out, could be developed further, the problem of the family and its rights taken up as well as many other issues troubling the modern man. I think, however, that the above-mentioned three issues are of fundamental importance in the sense that they need to be considered when reflecting on the other issues discussed today. The recognition of the sanctity of human life brings to mind the importance of human dignity and the imperative of respect for life as a condition of securing and developing personal greatness. The problem of progressive distancing of the rich from the poor is a challenge calling for the construction of a just world in which man can reach his full potential in the sincere gift of self to other people. Finally, the defence of the power of the human reason is a prerequisite to conduct a fruitful dialogue between the Church and the world, and indeed every social dialogue. These matters cannot be ignored when addressing other issues troubling the modern man.

(Translated by Anna Zagórska)