

NEW PARADIGM

Italian bishops' daily confirms the demise of morality

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On 25 August, the daily newspaper *Avvenire* published an interview by Luciano Moia with the new president and vice-president of ATISM (the Italian Theological Association for the Study of Morality): Father Martin M. Lintner and Gaia De Vecchi. The two

interviewees clearly confirmed the complete transformation of Catholic moral theology from yesterday and the day before, right up to the present day.

This is a radical change in which it is impossible to discern any form of continuity between the past and the present. It is not necessary for this interview to attest to the transition; these two moral theologians simply deserve credit for presenting it as a defined and now concluded process in the daily newspaper of the Italian bishops. No pope up to Benedict XVI would have accepted such a transformation, but it has now gone ahead and seems to have reached its conclusion.

The two theologians put forward this proposal: moral theology should move beyond rigid ideological dichotomies on topics such as abortion, gender and end-of-life issues, and focus instead on forming consciences and creating spaces for dialogue. Debate must be brought back into the realm of civil dialogue rather than ideological confrontation. We must set doctrine aside and focus our reflection on the human condition, avoiding the logic of opposing forces. This also applies at the ecclesial level, as it would establish a connection between 'the Magisterium and people's ordinary lives, their needs, their hopes, and their experiences of conscience'. Regarding issues such as assisted suicide and transgenderism, moral theology encourages us to consider how to advance the debate and address the existential needs of each individual. 'Harsh, divisive tones' must be avoided; we must move beyond 'extremism' and create 'spaces of freedom for the conscience'.

Reading these words, one gets the impression that moral theology should no longer appeal to abstract and universal moral norms, such as the Ten Commandments, as these are said to be the product of rationalism that distances itself from the reality of human existence. According to the two interviewees, speaking of such norms would mean entering the realm of ideology — the Ten Commandments are said to be ideological. This also seems to suggest that freedom of conscience means it does not need to be guided by an independent perspective that precedes and transcends the situation, yet is internal to it. Therefore, the Ten Commandments would hinder the freedom of conscience and fail to respect the dignity of the individual. It also seems to be implied that moral theology should no longer provide ethical principles and guidelines for politics, public education or the law because doing so would override people's consciences by transferring certain moral norms to the public institutional sphere. In this regard, it is difficult to see a future for the Church's social doctrine, which is part of moral theology.

This is confirmed by the fact that, when faced with any major personal or public

moral issue today, pastors merely call for discussion, avoiding taking sides so as not to appear divisive or ideological. In a televised discussion with the editor of the daily newspaper *Domani*, Cardinal Zuppi, Archbishop of Bologna and President of the Italian bishops' Conference (CEI), limited himself, when discussing abortion, to asking that we not act like the Horatii and the Curiatii.

These conclusions have been reached by moral theologians through decades of work, a process which cannot even be touched upon here in passing. One point must be highlighted, however. At a certain point, the dimensions of existence, history and the experience of conscience made their triumphant entry into moral theology. Like drops of water on a rock, this has brought about significant changes, as it has granted normative power not only to the norms of natural and revealed moral doctrine, but also to existence, history, and the experience of conscience. Many and varied paths have been taken, yet they all converge: the rejection of metaphysical realism; the idea that existence constitutes the being of the person; the elevation of hermeneutics to the status of the sole and comprehensive mode of thought — it is well known that the hermeneutical perspective assigns an active role to the situation in knowledge — the de-Hellenisation of Christianity — that is, its non-accidental need to draw upon natural reason — and the excessive exaltation of the role of conscience. Having once been the creative application of the norm through prudence, conscience now claims to be co-productive of the norm itself. Underlying all this is the Protestantisation of Catholic moral theology.

Existence and history are the realm of freedom. However, for a person to be free, they must exist; they cannot be free if they do not exist. Therefore, there is an essence that precedes and serves as the criterion for their freedom. This essence points to a norm of life that is not contingent or relative to time. This norm is capable of liberating time, conscience and existence from themselves. This is nothing if not concrete, nothing if not non-ideological, and nothing if not unifying.