PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

THE BIBLE AND MORALITY
BIBLICAL ROOTS OF CHRISTIAN CONDUCT

Preface

Introduction

0.1 A world in search of answers
0.2 Our objectives
0.3 Basic guidelines to the orientation of the document

0.3.1 The key concept: 'revealed morality'
0.3.2 The unity of the two Testaments

0.4 The addressees of the document

PART ONE – A REVEALED MORALITY: DIVINE GIFT AND HUMAN RESPONSE

1. The gift of creation and its moral implications

1.1. The gift of creation

1.1.1. In the first chapters of Genesis
1.1.2. In the Psalms
1.1.3. The basic realities of human existence

1.2 The moral responsibility of human beings as the image of God

1.2.1. In the creation narratives
1.2.2. In the Psalms
1.2.3. Conclusion: In the footsteps of Jesus

2. The gift of the Covenant in the Old Testament and norms of human conduct

2.1. The progressive perception of the Covenant (historical approach)

2.1.1 The basic founding experience: a shared journey towards freedom
2.1.2 First hints of a theological interpretation
2.1.3 A theological concept which expresses this intuition: the Covenant

2.2 Expressions of the Covenant (canonical approach)

2.2.1 The Covenant with Noah and with ‘all flesh’
2.2.2 The Covenant with Abraham
2.2.3 The Covenant with Moses and with the Israelite people

2.2.3.1 The Decalogue
2.2.3.2 The legislative codes
2.2.3.3 The moral teaching of the prophets

2.2.4 The Covenant with David
2.2.5 The ‘New Covenant’ according to Jeremiah
2.2.6 The moral teaching of the Sages

3. The New Covenant in Jesus Christ as God’s final gift and its moral implications

3.1 The coming of God’s kingdom and its moral implications

3.1.1 The kingdom of God: main theme of Jesus’ preaching in the Synoptics
3.1.2 The preaching of the kingdom of God and its moral implications

3.2 The gift of the Son and its moral implications according to John

3.2.1 The gift of the Son, an expression of God’s saving love
3.2.2 The life of the Son and its moral implications

3.3 The gift of the Son in the Pauline corpus and other Letters

3.3.1. God’s gift according to Paul
3.3.2. Paul’s moral teaching
3.3.3. Following Christ in the Letters of James and Peter

3.4. The New Covenant and its moral implications in Hebrews

3.4.1. Christ as mediator of the New Covenant
3.4.2. The demands of the gift of the New Covenant

3.5. The Covenant and the task of Christians according to the Book of Revelation

3.5.1. A Covenant that traverses history
3.5.2. The task of Christians

3.6. The Eucharist, synthesis of the New Covenant

3.6.1. The Eucharist as gift
3.6.2. Implications of the Eucharist as gift

4. From gift to forgiveness

4.1. God’s forgiveness in the Old Testament
4.2. God’s forgiveness in the New Testament

5. The final goal as the inspiration for moral conduct

5.1 The Realized Kingdom, God All in All: Paul's message
5.2. The goal of the Book of Revelation: partnership with God and with Christ
5.3. Conclusion

PART TWO: BIBLICAL CRITERIA FOR MORAL REFLECTION

Introduction

1. Fundamental Criteria

1.1. First fundamental criterion: conformity with the biblical view of human nature

1.1.1. Explanation
1.1.2. Biblical data
1.1.3. Implications for today's world

1.2. Second fundamental criterion: conformity with the example of Jesus

1.2.1 Explanation
1.2.2. Biblical data
1.2.3. Implications for today's world

1.3. The Fundamental Criteria: conclusion

2. Specific Criteria

2.1. First specific criterion: convergence

2.1.1. Biblical data
2.1.2. Implications for today's world

2.2. Second specific criterion: contrast

2.2.1 Biblical data
2.2.2. Implications for today's world

2.3. Third specific criterion: advance

2.3.1. Biblical data
2.3.2. Implications for today's world

2.4. Fourth specific criterion: community dimension

2.4.1. Biblical data
2.4.2. Implications for today's world

2.5. Fifth specific criterion: finality

2.5.1. Biblical data
2.5.2. Implications for today's world

2.6. Sixth specific criterion: discernment

2.6.1. Biblical data
2.6.2. Implications for today's world

GENERAL CONCLUSION

1. Original elements
2. Perspectives for the future

Exodus 20.2-17	Matthew 5.3-12
I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, you shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of their parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments. You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name. Remember the sabbath day, and keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work. But the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; you shall not do any work – you, your son or your daughter, your male of female slave, your livestock, or the alien resident in your towns. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea and all that is in them, but rested the seventh day; therefore	Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against your falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they

the Lord blessed the sabbath day and consecrated it. Honour your father and your mother, so that your days may be long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbour. You shall not covet your neighbour's house; you shall not covet your neighbour's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbour.	persecuted the prophets who were before you.

PREFACE

The yearning for happiness, the desire to achieve a fully satisfying life, is forever deeply rooted in the human heart. The realization of this desire depends mainly on our behaviour, which agrees, but sometimes clashes with that of others. In which way is it possible to arrive at an effective decision regarding the just behaviour that leads individuals, communities and entire nations towards a successful life, in other words, towards happiness?

For Christians Holy Scripture is not only a source of revelation on which to ground one's faith, it is also an indispensable reference point for morality. They are convinced that in the bible they can find indications and norms of right behaviour to attain fullness of life.

Such a conviction encounters various objections. The first difficulty is the instinctive refusal of norms, obligations and commandments within the human person, particularly strong in our own days. Equally cogent in contemporary society is the desire to attain full happiness together with unlimited liberty, that is, freedom to act in accordance with one's whims, without the constraint of any norms. For some people such an unlimited freedom is in fact essential for the attainment of true happiness. Within this frame of mind human dignity itself demands that it not be subjected to externally imposed norms: each human person should freely and autonomously decide for himself what he deems just and acceptable. Hence the normative complex present in the Scriptures, the development of Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church that interprets and actualizes these norms appear as obstacles to happiness of which we must free ourselves.

A second difficulty derives from Sacred Scripture itself: biblical writings were redacted at least nineteen hundred years ago and belong to distant epochs in which life conditions were very different from those of today. Many actual situations and problems were completely unknown in these writings and therefore one may think that they can offer no appropriate answers to these problems. Consequently even if the fundamental value of the bible as an inspired text is acknowledged some people retain a strong sceptical attitude and maintain that Scripture is of no use for offering solutions to the numerous problems of our times. Present humanity is

confronted every day with delicate moral problems continually presented by the sciences and by globalization; even convinced believers have the impression that many of our past certainties have been annulled; just think about such themes as violence, terrorism, war, immigration, distribution of wealth , respect for natural resources, life, work, sexuality, genetic research, the family and community life. Faced by such complex problems one is tempted to marginalize, totally or partially, Sacred Scripture. In this case too, though for a variety of motives, the sacred text is laid aside and solutions to the grave and urgent problems of today are sought elsewhere.

Already in 2002 the Pontifical Biblical Commission, at the behest of the then President Card. Joseph Ratzinger, set about to examine the problem of the relationship between the bible and morality by posing itself the question: what is the value and the significance of the inspired text for today's morality, regarding which the above mentioned difficulties cannot be neglected?

In the bible we find many norms, commandments, laws, collections of codices, etc. An attentive reading, however, draws attention to the fact that such norms are never found by themselves in isolation, they always belong to a definite context. It can be stated that in biblical anthropology the primary and basic factor is God's action, forestalling human behaviour: his gifts of grace, his call to communion. The normative complex is consequential; it shows the proper way to accept and live out God's gift. At the root of this biblical concept is the view of the human person as created by God, it is never an isolated, autonomous being, detached from everything and from everyone; it stands in a radical and essential relationship with God and with a brotherly community. God created mankind in his own image, its very existence is the first and basic gift received from God. In biblical perspective a discourse on moral norms cannot treat them in isolation and in a restricted fashion, but it needs to insert them into the context of the entire biblical view of human existence.

The first part of the document therefore sets out to present this characteristic biblical concept in which anthropology and theology intertwine. Following the canonical order of the bible the human person first appears as a creature to whom God had donated life itself, it then appears as a member of the chosen people with whom God had entered a special covenant, and finally, as brother and sister of Jesus, incarnate Son of God.

The second part of the document stresses the fact that direct solutions to the numerous outstanding problems cannot be found in Sacred Scripture. However, although the bible does not offer prefabricated solutions, it does present some criteria whose application is certainly of help in finding valid solutions for human behaviour. Two basic criteria are presented in the first place, conformity with the biblical concept of the human being and conformity with the example of Jesus. These are followed by other more particular criteria. From Holy Scripture as a whole at least six strong lines of reasoning emerge that can lead to making solid moral decisions with a Scriptural foundation: 1) opening up to various cultures, hence a certain ethical universalism (criterion of convergence); 2) a firm stand against incompatible values (criterion of opposition); 3) a process of refinement of the human conscience which can be observed within each of the two Testaments (criterion of progress); 4) a rectification of the tendency to leave moral decisions to the subjective, individual sphere alone (criterion of community dimension); 5) an aperture towards the absolute future of the world and of history that enables us to mark out clearly the goal and the motivations of human behaviour (criterion of finality); 6) an attentive evaluation, in each case, of the relative or absolute value of moral principles and precepts in the bible (criterion of discernment).

All these criteria, whose listing is only representative not exhaustive, are deeply rooted in the bible; their application can certainly be of help to the believer. They show which points biblical revelation offers to help us, in our own day, in the delicate process of correct moral discernment.

I wish to express my thanks to the members of the Pontifical Biblical Commission for their patient and demanding work. I hope that the present text will be of help in discovering ever more the fascinating values of a genuine Christian life, and to consider the bible as an inexhaustible treasure, ever actual for determining just behaviour, on which the attainment of happiness in its fullness by individuals and by the entire human community depends.

William Cardinal Levada

President

11th May 2008

Solemnity of Pentecost

Introduction

1. Human beings have always been in search of happiness and meaning. As St. Augustine well expressed it: “They want to be happy even living a life that will not make them so.” (De civitate Dei, XIV,4). This statement already poses the problem of the tension between profound desire and moral choices, whether conscious or not. Pascal aptly describes this tension: “If human beings are not made for God, why is it that they attain happiness only in God? If they are made for God why do they show themselves so averse to God?” (Pensées,II,169)

In presenting this reflection on the delicate subject of the relationship between the Bible and morality the Biblical Commission premises two crucial propositions: 1 – For every believer and for every person God is the ultimate answer to this search for happiness and meaning. 2 – The one Holy Scripture, comprising both Testaments, is a valid and useful locus of dialogue with our contemporaries on questions concerning morality.

O.1. A world in search of answers

2. In advancing this project it is not possible to overlook present conditions. In an era of globalization a rapid transformation of ethical options is visible in many areas of our society under the impact of population migrations, the increasing complexity of social relationships, and of scientific progress, particularly in the fields of psychology, genetics and communications. All this has a profound influence on the moral conscience of many individuals and groups to the point of fostering the development of a culture based on relativism, tolerance and on an acceptance of new ideas dependent on inadequate philosophical and theological foundations. Also for a good number of Catholic Christiansthis culture of tolerance is accompanied by an increasing mistrust, or even an outright impatience, with certain aspects of the Church’s moral teaching, which are firmly founded on Scripture

0.3 Our objectives

3. In the present document the reader will not find either a complete biblical moral theology or recipes for ready answers to moral problems, whether old or new, currently discussed in all forums, including the mass-media. Our undertaking makes no claim to replace the work of philosophers and moral theologians. An adequate discussion of moral problems posed by moralists would need a methodical investigation and a study of the human sciences which are

completely outside our field of competence. Our purpose is more modest; it has two objectives.

1. First of all we would like to situate Christian morality within the larger sphere of anthropology and of biblical theologies. This will bring out more clearly its specific nature and its originality both in relation to natural ethics and those moralities which are founded on human experience and reason, and to the ethical systems of other religions.

2. The other objective is in some ways a more practical one. While it is not easy to make proper use of the Bible to throw light on moral questions or to provide a positive answer to delicate problems or situations, the Bible does provide some methodological criteria for progress along this road.

This double purpose determines and explains the twofold structure of the present document. First : "A revealed morality: divine gift and human response"; then : "Biblical criteria for moral reflection".

From the point of view of method: without wishing to side-line the historico-critical method, for many reasons indispensable, we considered our research would benefit from an overall preference for the canonical approach to scripture (Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, I,C,1).

0.3 Basic guidelines to the orientation of the document

0.3.1 The key concept: "revealed morality"

4. To convey the basic thrust of scripture as a whole we need first to introduce the concept of "revealed morality", despite its possible unfamiliarity. This is a key concept for our enquiry. To understand this concept certain common prejudices must be set aside. The reduction of morality to a code of individual or collective conduct, a sum of virtues to be practised or to the requirements of an assumed universal law, obscures the special character, the values and the permanent validity of biblical morality.

At this point two basic concepts must be introduced, which will later be developed. 1. Logically, morality is secondary to God's founding initiative, which we express theologically in terms of gift. In the biblical perspective morality is rooted in the prior gift of life, of intellect and of free will (creation), and above all in the entirely unmerited offer of a privileged, intimate relationship between human beings and God (covenant). Morality is not primarily the human response but a revelation of the God's purpose and of the divine gift. In other words, for the Bible, morality is the consequence of the experience of God, more precisely the God-given human experience of an entirely unmerited gift. 2. From this premise, the Law itself, an integral part of the covenant process, is seen to be a gift from God. Law is not primarily a juridical concept, founded on conduct and attitudes, but a theological one, which the Bible itself aptly expresses with the term "way" (derek in Hebrew, hodos in Greek): a way to follow.

In the present context this approach is necessary in a very special way. Moral instruction certainly forms part of the Church's essential mission, but only secondarily, i.e. in relation to our appreciation of the gift of God and of a spiritual experience. This is something which our contemporaries often find it difficult to understand and adequately appreciate.

The term "revealed morality" is perhaps neither classical nor current. Nevertheless it finds its place within the orbit traced by the Second Vatican Council in the dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation. The God of the Bible reveals not primarily a code of conduct but "Himself"

in his mystery and "the mystery of his will". "This pattern of revelation unfolds through deeds and words which are intimately interconnected: the works performed by God in the history of salvation illustrate and confirm the doctrine and realities signified by the words; the words, for their part, proclaim the works, and bring to light the mystery they contain." (Dei Verbum, I.2). Accordingly, all the deeds through which God manifests himself possess a moral dimension in so far as they invite human beings to conform their thought and their actions to the divine model: "You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy." (Lev 19.2); "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect". Mt 5.48)

0.3.2. The unity of the two Testaments

5. The whole of revelation – that is, the design of God, who wants to make himself known and to open to all the way of salvation – converges on Christ. At the heart of the first covenant the "way" denotes both an exodus (the original liberating event) and a body of teaching, the Torah. As the heart of the New Covenant Jesus says of himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life." (John 14.6). He therefore sums up in his own person and in his mission all God's liberating dynamism, and, in a certain way, also the whole of morality, theologically understood as God's gift, as the way spontaneously offered to men and women to attain eternal life, total intimacy with him. The profound unity of the two Testaments is here evident; Hugh of St. Victor expressed this intuition in his incisive expression: "The whole of Scripture is in one book alone, and this one book is Christ." (De arca Noe, II.8).

We shall therefore take care to avoid oppositions between the Old and the New Testament in the moral sphere or in any other. In this regard the previous document of the Pontifical Biblical Commission offers useful pointers when it describes the unity of the two Testaments in terms of continuity, discontinuity and advance. (The Jewish People and their Holy Scriptures in the Christian Bible, nn. 40 – 42).

0.4.1. The addressees of the document

6. Our exposition is relevant primarily to believers, to whom it is primarily addressed. However, we hope to stimulate a broader dialogue among men and women of good will, from diverse cultures and religions, in search of an authentic progress beyond their daily troubles towards happiness and meaning.

PART ONE

A REVEALED MORALITY: DIVINE GIFT AND HUMAN RESPONSE

7. The relationship between divine gift and human response, between God's antecedent action and human obligations, is a determining factor for the Bible and for the morality revealed in it. Beginning with the creation we shall attempt to describe the gifts of God, following the various phases of God's activity for humanity and for the chosen people; we shall also consider the duties God has connected with those gifts.

Beside the relationships already described, two other factors are fundamental for biblical morality. It is not characterized by a rigorous moralism. Pardon granted to fallen humanity forms part of God's gift; and, as the New Testament makes very clear, earthly endeavour develops in the inspiring perspective of eternal life, the completion of God's gifts.

1. The gift of creation and its implications for morality

1.1. The gift of creation

8. The Bible presents God as the Creator of all that exists, especially in the first chapters of Genesis and in a whole series of Psalms.

1.1.1. In the first chapters of Genesis

The great vision of history which unfolds from the starting-point of the Pentateuch is introduced by two accounts of the origins. (Gen 1-2).

In the canonical arrangement the divine act of creation stands at the head of the biblical narrative. This initial creation includes everything, "heaven and earth" (Gen 1.1) Thereby it is affirmed that everything is due to God's decision and is a free gift of the Creator God. For Israel the acknowledgement of God as the Creator of all is not the beginning of the knowledge of God, it is the fruit of her experience with him and of the history of her faith.

The Creator's specific gift to humanity consists in the fact that God created human beings in his own image: "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness." Gen 1.26). Following the order of the narrative (Gen 1.1–31) human beings appear at the climax of God's creation. In Gen 1.26–28 they are described as God's representative, in such a way that they relate to their Creator, and God himself - invisible and without image – empowers his creature, humankind. We have here a outline of theological anthropology so that one cannot speak of God without speaking of humanity, nor of humanity without speaking of God.

More specifically, at least six features contribute to the status of the human person as God's "image":

1. Reason, the capacity and the duty to know and understand the created world.

2. Freedom, the capacity and obligation to make decisions and to take responsibility for decisions made.

3. Leadership, not unconditional but in subordination to God.

4. The capacity to act in conformity with him of whom the human person is an image, namely by imitating God.

5. The dignity of being a person, a 'relational' being, capable of having personal relationships with God and with other human beings.

6. The sanctity of human life.

1.1.2 In the Psalms

9. The part of the Bible which speaks most particularly of God as Creator is a series of psalms: e.g. 8; 19; 139; 145; 148. The psalms show a soteriological understanding of creation, because they stress a link between God's activity in creation and his activity in the history of salvation. They describe the creation not in scientific but in symbolic terms. Nor do they present pre-scientific reflections on the world. They merely express Israel's praise of the Creator.

They assert the transcendence and pre-existence of the Creator, who exists prior to all creation: "Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from

everlasting to everlasting you are God." (Ps 90.2). By contrast the world's distinguishing feature is its history in time, its beginning and its passing away. God does not belong to the world nor does he form part of it. Rather, the world exists only because God created it, and it continues to exist only because God maintains it continually in existence. God who creates them provides for the needs of every creature: "The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season, You open your hand, satisfying the desire of every living thing." (Ps 145.15–16).

The universe is not a self-maintaining whole closed in on itself. On the contrary man and woman as well as all other creatures depend constantly and radically on their Creator, It is God, who, in a 'creatio continua' imparts vitality and keeps them in existence. While Gen 1 speaks of God in the work of creation, Ps 104 addresses the Creator God in a prayer based on the experience of God's marvellous generosity, acknowledging the total dependence on him of all existing beings: "When you hide your face they are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to their dust. When you send forth your spirit , they are created; and you renew the face of the ground." (Ps104.29–30).

It is from this God who has created and preserves all, that Israel expects help: "Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth." (Ps 128.4; cf. 121.2). God's power, however, embraces not only Israel but the whole world, all peoples: "Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him." (Ps 33.8). The call to praise the Creator extends to the whole of creation: heaven and earth, sun and moon, sea-monsters and wild animals, kings and peoples, the young and the old (Ps 148). God's sovereignty includes all that exists.

The Creator has assigned a special position to human beings. Despite human frailty and weakness the psalmist expresses his wonder: "You have given them dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under their feet, all sheep and oxen, and also the beasts of the field, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea, whatever passes on the paths of the seas." (Ps 8.6–7). 'Glory' and 'honour' are kingly attributes; through them a royal status in God's creation is assigned to human beings. Such a position places human beings next to God, who, on his part, is himself characterized by 'glory' and 'honour' (cf. Ps 29.1; 104.1), and places them over the rest of creation. He calls human beings to govern the created world, but responsibly and in a wise and caring manner, characteristic of the sovereignty of the Creator himself.

1.1.3. The basic realities of human existence

10. To be God's creature, to have received everything from God, to be intimately and essentially God's gift, this is the basic reality of human existence, and consequently also of human conduct. This relationship with God is not an adjunct, a secondary or transitory element added to human existence, but constitutes its permanent and irreplaceable foundation. According to this biblical view nothing that exists comes into being by itself as some kind of self-creation, nor is it caused by chance; it is basically determined by the will and creative power of God. This God is transcendent and does not form part of the world; but the world and the human beings in it are not without God; they depend radically on him. They can never attain a true and real understanding of themselves and of the world apart from God, without acknowledging this total dependence on him. Such an initial gift is at the same time fundamental and permanent, it will never be cancelled but will be perfected by future interventions and gifts from God.

Such a gift is determined by God's creative will. Hence human beings cannot treat it or use it arbitrarily, they have the duty to discover and respect the characteristics and the structures with which the Creator has endowed his creature.

1.2. The moral responsibility of human beings as the image of God.

11. After this explanation that the whole world was created by God, that it is a gift, intimately and continually dependent on him, an attempt must now be made to discover the manner of conduct inscribed by God in humanity and in his whole creation.

1.2.1. In the creation narrative

Each property that makes a person God's 'image' carries important moral implications.

1. Knowledge and discernment are part of God's gift. Human beings are capable, and, as creatures, obliged to seek God's purpose and to try to discern the will of God in order to act rightly.

2. Because of the freedom with which men and women are endowed, they are called to moral discernment, choice, and decision. After Adam's sin and its punishment in Gen 3.22 God says: "See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil." This text is difficult to explain. On one hand everything points to an ironical sense of this sentence, because Adam, despite the prohibition, tried with his own strength, to seize the fruit by his own powers without waiting for God to give it to him in due time. On the other hand, the symbolism of the tree of all knowledge – this is the sense of the biblical expression 'good and evil' – is not limited to a moral context; it also means knowledge of good and bad prospects, of the future and of destiny: it implies the mastery of time, which belongs to God alone. As regards the moral freedom given to the human beings, it cannot simply be reduced to the liberty granted to human beings to regulate and determine themselves, for the ultimate point of reference is not a human person but God himself.

3. The guidance entrusted to human beings implies responsibility, the commitment to govern and administer. They have also the duty to give shape in a creative way to the world made by God. They cannot shirk this responsibility since the creation is not to be preserved as it is, but undergoes continuous development. This is true of humanity itself, in which nature and culture are united, no less than of the rest of creation.

4. This responsibility must be exercised in a wise and caring manner, in imitation of the sovereignty of God himself over his creation. Human beings can conquer nature and explore the vastness of space. The extraordinary scientific and technological progress of our day can be considered as achievements of the task entrusted to human beings by the Creator. They must, however, remain within the limits appointed by the Creator; otherwise the earth will become an object of exploitation, which may destroy the delicate balance and harmony of nature. Although it would be ingenuous to think that we can find in Ps 8 a solution of the present crisis, Ps 8 does if read in the context of the whole of Israel's theology of creation, call into question contemporary practices and demand a new sense of responsibility for the world. God, humanity and the created universe are interrelated; consequently, so are theology, anthropology and ecology. If we do not acknowledge God's rights in the relationships between ourselves and the world, dominion will easily degenerate into unrestrained domination and exploitation leading to an ecological disaster.

5. The dignity which human persons possess as rational beings invites and obliges them to live out a just relationship with God, to whom they owe everything. Essential in this relationship is gratitude (cf. the next paragraph, n. 12, on the psalms). Moreover, this implies a dynamic relationship of common responsibility between human persons, of mutual respect, and of a constant search for balance not only between the sexes but also between the individual and the

community (individual and social values).

6. The sacredness of human life demands total respect and safeguard for it. It also prohibits the shedding of human blood “for in his own image God made humankind.” (Gen 9.6)

1.2.2. In the Psalms

12 . The recognition of God as Creator evokes praise and adoration of him, for creation bears witness to divine wisdom, power and faithfulness. When, together with the psalmist, we praise God for the splendour, the order and the beauty of creation, we are invited to have a profound respect for the world of which humanity forms a part. The human person is the crown of creation because human beings can enter into a personal relationship with God and can express praise in their own name or in the name of other creatures. Through human beings and through the worship of the community the whole creation offers praise to the Creator God (cf. Ps 148). The creation psalms also lead to a healthy and positive evaluation of the present world, because life in this world is fundamentally good. In ages past Christian tradition was perhaps so preoccupied with eternal salvation that it failed to appraise sufficiently the natural world. The cosmic dimension of faith in creation expressed in the psalms requires us to turn our attention to nature and history, to the human and non-human world, thus uniting cosmology, anthropology and theology.

The Psalter deals with the necessary themes regarding human existence within a mysterious, uncertain and menacing world (as in the psalms of lament). The psalmists however, continue to attest their faith in a loving Creator who takes constant care of his creatures, and to raise an everlasting hymn of praise and thanksgiving: “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good, for his steadfast love endures forever.” (Ps 136.1).

1.2.3. Conclusion: In the footsteps of Jesus

13. The New Testament takes over the creation theology of the Old Testament in its entirety, endowing it with a decisive Christological dimension. (e.g. John 1.1–18; Col 1. 15–20). This inevitably has its moral consequences. Jesus supersedes the ancient prescriptions regarding pure and impure (Mk 7.18–19), thus implying with Genesis that all things created are good. Paul goes precisely in the same direction (Rom 14.14; cf. 1 Tim 4.4–5). As for the key phrase ‘in God’s image’, the Pauline corpus refers it not only to Christ, ‘firstborn of all creation’ Col 1.15), but to every human person (1Cor 11.7; Col 3.10); no wonder then that we find in these letters the anthropological characteristics suggested by that phrase, together with its moral aspects: rationality (‘law written in the heart’, ‘the law of reason’ in Rom 2.15; 7.23), freedom (1 Cor 3.17; Gal 5.1,13), holiness (Rom 6.22; Eph 4.24), etc. We shall have the occasion later (cf. ns. 97, 99) to discuss also its relational dimension, especially with regard to matrimony (cf. Gen 1.27: “male and female he created them”).

2. The gift of the Covenant in the Old Testament and the norms of human conduct

14. The creation, with its moral implications, is the initial gift and remains the basic gift of God, but it is by no means his only or final gift. Over and above creation God has show his infinite goodness, has turned towards his human creatures particularly by the choice of the people of Israel and his covenant with them; at the same time he reveals the right path of human conduct.

The presentation of the full richness of the biblical theme of covenant requires a consideration of two points of view: the deepening awareness of this reality in the history of Israel, and its narration as presented in the final redaction of the canonical Bible.

2.1. The progressive perception of the Covenant (historical approach)

2.1.1. The basic and foundational experience: a shared journey towards freedom

15. The birth of Israel as a people occurred at the time of Moses; or, more precisely, in the perspective of biblical theology the historical departure from Egypt was the basic founding event.

It was only later, on the basis of this founding event, that the oral traditions about the ancestors of the patriarchal period were recovered and reinterpreted, and human origins were presented in a largely theological and symbolic form. In general, therefore, the events recounted in Genesis can be considered as belonging to the prehistory of Israel as an established people.

2.1.2. The first hints of a theological interpretation

16. If the exodus from Egypt made possible the appearance of Israel as an established people, this is the fruit of a theological interpretation of the event, an interpretation which was made, at least seminally, from the very beginning. Such a theological interpretation can be summarized in the following way: it was the awareness of the presence and of the intervention of a God, protector of a group of people who emerged under Moses' leadership, a presence and an intervention in the primordial and founding event, the crossing of the sea, experienced as miraculous. This is attested by the symbolic name by which this protector God calls and reveals himself (Ex 3.14). The Hebrew Bible will subsequently use this name frequently in the form YHWH or abbreviated as YH. Both are difficult to translate but philologically they imply God's dynamic and active presence among his people. The Jews do not pronounce this name, and the Greek translators of the Hebrew text rendered it with the word 'Kyrios', the Lord. In the present document we shall follow the Christian tradition and by rendering the Hebrew word YHWH as 'Lord'.

A first theological reflection can be expressed in four principal features of the God of Israel: he accompanies, liberates, gives and gathers.

1. Accompanies: this refers to the journey in the desert, thanks to a presence, indicated, according to the traditions, by a guiding angel and by the cloud, suggestive of the unfathomable mystery.

2. He delivers from the yoke of oppression and from death.

3 A double gift: He donates himself as the God of this nascent people; but he also grants 'the way' (derek) to the people, that is, the means to enter and to remain in relationship with God and give themselves back to him.

4. He gathers this emerging people around a common project, the assignment to 'live together' (to form a qahal, to which corresponds the Greek word ekklesia).

2.1.3. A theological concept which expresses this intuition: the Covenant

17. How did Israel express in its religious literature this unique relationship between itself and this God who accompanies, liberates, gives and gathers?

a. From human alliances to the theological Covenant

At a certain moment, difficult to pinpoint, a great and comprehensive interpretative concept was adopted by Israel's theologians: the notion of covenant.

The theme had become important enough to determine from the very beginning, at least in retrospect, the conception of the relationship between God and his privileged people. In the biblical narrative the fundamental and founding event is immediately followed by the conclusion of a covenant: "on the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt" (Ex 19.1), symbolic both of a sacred moment and of a new beginning. This means that the fundamental and founding event includes, in its metahistorical dimension, the striking of a covenant on Sinai, in such a way that, in diachronic biblical theological perspective, the primordial event is described in terms of exodus-covenant.

Moreover, this hermeneutical concept referring to the exodus from Egypt extends back into the past as an aetiology. It is found in Genesis. The notion of covenant is used to describe the relationship between the LORD God and Abraham, the ancestor in a mysterious time long past (Gen 15.17), and between the LORD God and the survivors of the flood in the time of Noah the patriarch (Gen 9.8–17).

In the ancient Near East covenants between human beings existed in the form of treaties, agreements, contracts, marriages as well as pacts of friendship. Protector gods acted as witnesses and guarantors in the stipulations of such human alliances. The Bible, too, mentions alliances of this kind.

However, in default of evidence to the contrary – and no archeological document so far discovered has invalidated this observation – the application of the idea of alliance is original in the Bible; nowhere else do we find the concept of a covenant between divine and human partners.

b. Alliances between unequal partners

18. It would have been inconceivable for early Israel to define its privileged relationship with God, the wholly Other, the Transcendent, the Omnipotent in terms of horizontal equality

God ------ Israel

As soon as the theological idea of covenant was proposed, it was only natural to think in terms of the alliances between unequal partners, familiar in diplomatic and juridical practice of the extra-biblical ancient Near East, the well-known vassal contracts.

It is difficult to deny the influence of the political ideology of vassalage as a pointedrtowards understanding the biblical covenant. The idea of a divine partner who takes and keeps the initiative throughout the alliance process forms the background of almost all the major texts regarding the Old Testament covenant.

God

|

Israel

In this type of relationship between partners the sovereign pledges himself towards his vassal and exacts a pledge from his vassal towards himself. In other words he obliges himself towards

his vassal in the same manner that he obliges the vassal towards himself. In the process of stipulating an alliance he is the only one who expresses himself; the vassal, at this stage, remains silent.

This double motion is phrased in theological terms by means of two principal themes; Grace (the LORD pledges himself) and the Law (the LORD exacts a pledge from the people that becomes his own 'property': Ex 19.5–6). Within this theological context grace can be defined as the gift (in some texts unconditional) which God makes of himself. The Law as gift given to humanity is an ethico-cultural instrument, a way, a journey (derek) which permits humans to enter and remain 'in a state of covenant'.

At a later stage this dynamism of covenant relationship seems to have crystallized into a fixed expression, usually termed 'the covenant-formula' (Bundesformel): "I will be your God and you shall be my people" or equivalent expressions. We find it scattered here and there in both Testaments, particularly in the context of the 'new covenant' foretold by Jeremiah (31.31–34), a sufficiently clear indication that we are dealing with a principal issue, a fundamental constant.

A similar pattern obtains for David and his lineage: "I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me." (2 Sam 7.14).

c. The place of human freedom

19. Within this theological context the moral freedom of human beings is not to be considered as necessary and constitutive, as a consent to the covenant, in which case it would be an alliance between equals. Human liberty enters only at a later stage, as a consequence, when the whole covenant process is complete. All the relevant biblical texts distinguish, on the one hand, the content of the covenant, and on the other the rites or the ceremonies that follow the gift of the covenant. The people's pledge, under oath, forms no part of the conditions or clauses, but only of the elements of a juridical guarantee, in the context of a cultic celebration.

It is in this way that revealed morality is born, as a 'morality in a covenantal situation': a gift of God, entirely gratuitous which, once offered, appeals to the freedom of the human person to respond with a complete 'yes', an integral acceptance. The least derogation of any gravity is equivalent to a refusal. This revealed morality, expressed in the context of a theological covenant, is without precedent in the ethical and cultic codes that governed the lives of neighbouring peoples. It is essentially a response; it follows grace, the gift of a God who pledges himself.

c. Consequences for moral conduct.

20. Consequently morality is much more than a code of conduct and attitudes. It shows itself as a revealed and donated 'journey' (derek). This leitmotif is developed in Deuteronomy, among the prophets, in the wisdom literature and in the didactic psalms. Two main factors must be considered:

1. In the biblical sense this 'journey' must be understood primarily in a holistic way: it denotes the Law as a gift of God, fruit of the exclusive initiative of a sovereign God who pledges himself in a covenant, and exacts a pledge from the human partner. This Law must be distinguished from the many laws through which it finds expression in concrete form in writing, on stone, on parchment, on papyrus or in other ways.

2. Such a moral path is not embarked upon without preparation. In the Bible it belongs to a

historical journey of salvation and of deliverance, which can be characterized as primordial and founding. This premise leads to an issue of extreme importance: revealed morality does not occupy the first place, it is secondary to an experience of God, to a 'knowing', in the biblical sense, revealed through the primordial event. Revealed morality carries forward, so to say, the process of liberation which had its archetypical beginning in the exodus, and assures and guarantees the stability of the process. In short, issuing from an experience of liberation, 'morality in a covenantal situation' seeks to preserve and develop this liberty, both exterior and interior, in daily life. The believer's moral option presupposes a personal experience of God, even though this may be inarticulate

and only vaguely conscious.

2.2. The various expressions of the Covenant (canonical approach)

21. We must now study the theme of covenant as it occurs in the canonical order of the Bible.

2.2.1 The Covenant with Noah and with 'all flesh'

a. Punishment and Covenant

In the Old Testament the word 'Covenant' is found for the first time in the flood narrative (Gen 6.18; 9.8–17). In this tradition the gratuity of the divine initiative and its unconditional validity are strongly emphasized.

The cosmic punishment is proportionate to the cosmic extent of the offence: "Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw that the earth was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted its ways upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh'." (Gen 6.11–13).

Immediately, however, the covenantal project intervenes. As regards the partners the covenant is established concentrically, simultaneously with Noah himself (6.18), with his family and his future descendants (9.9), with 'all flesh', that is, everything which has 'a breath of life' (9.10–17), and even with 'the earth' (9.13). One can speak, therefore, of a cosmic covenant proportionate to the state of perversity and to the punishment.

God establishes a 'sign' of this covenant, an obvious cosmic sign: "I have set my bow in the clouds..." (9.13–16). The initial impression is that the sign refers simply to the rainbow as the meteorological phenomenon which occurs after rain. With all probability, however, we cannot exclude a military connotation, in view of the fact that the word 'bow' used by God always (except in Ezk 1.28) denotes the weapon and not the rainbow. From the point of view of the symbolism two details merit consideration here. First, the very shape of the bow, stretched towards heaven and no longer towards the earth, suggests the idea of peace, fruit of a purely gratuitous initiative by God; its position prevents any further arrow being aimed at the earth. Moreover, as the bow reaches to heaven but rests on the earth as a kind of vertical bridge, it symbolizes the contact re-established between God and a reborn and saved humanity.

b. Consequences for moral conduct

22. Three aspects especially occur to the modern reader.

1. From the point of view of ecology: human corruption and violence have great repercussions on our habitat and on the environment (Gen 6.13). They run the risk of reducing God's creative

work to chaos (Ho 4.2–3).

2. From the anthropological viewpoint, the human being retains the dignity of being God's image (Gen 9.6; cf. 1.26–27) even in a corrupt world. A barrier must be erected against evil so that human beings, experiencing God's salvation, may accomplish their mission of multiplying, filling the earth and subduing it (9.1, 7).

3. From the viewpoint of the management of resources: a certain control over animal life is given to human beings (compare 9.3 and 1.29). They must nevertheless respect every life as something mysterious (9.4). The broadening of the covenant to all living beings and to all the earth emphasizes the status of the human beings as companion to all created beings. In this context the re-wording of the exhortation to Noah, a second Adam, merits special attention. Instead of "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over....." (1,28), we now find only: "Be fruitful and multiply, abound on the earth and multiply in it." (9,7). The full implications of this are that animals are handed over to human beings as nourishment (9.3). The experience of evil and of 'violence' seem to have overshadowed the ideal mission entrusted to humanity in the beginning of creation. Their role as administrators and regents of creation has been relativized. The explicit reference to Gen 1.26–27 in 9.1–2 shows that the moral outlook of Gen 1 has not been cancelled. It remains a standard of reference.

2.2.2. The Covenant with Abraham

a. Narratives about Abraham-Isaac and about Jacob

23. From the literary point of view the 'Abraham-Isaac cycle' (Gen 12.1–25; 18; 26. 1–33) is closely linked to the 'Jacob cycle' (Gen 25.19–34; 26.34–37.1). The stories about Abraham-Isaac and those about Jacob are similar even in detail. Abraham and Jacob travel along the same routes, they cross the country from North to South following the same watershed. These topographical markers frame the literary complex of Gen 12–36 (cf. Gen 12.6–9 and 33.18–35.27). These literary facts are an invitation to read the narratives on Abraham in the broader context of the sequence concerning Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

b. Covenant, blessing and Law

The covenant given by the LORD has three corollaries: a promise, responsibility and a law.

1. The promise is that of the land (Gen 15.18; 17.8; 28.15) and of a progeny - a promise addressed to Abraham, then to Isaac and then to Jacob (cf. Gen 17.15–19; 26.24; 28.14). This topic later receives a spiritual interpretation. (Cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, nn. 56 – 57).

2. The responsibility confided to Abraham concerns not only his own clan, but more broadly, all nations. The biblical expression concerning this responsibility uses the vocabulary of blessing: Abraham must become a great and powerful nation, and all the nations of the earth will be blessed (brk) in him (Gen 18.18). Abraham's intercession for Sodom, which follows immediately in the narrative, illustrates his function as mediator. Thus the covenant does not lead only to inheriting the gift of God (a progeny and a land), it is at the same time a task to be accomplished.

3. Abraham's task in the covenant is expressed as obedience to the law: "I have chosen him that he may charge his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing

righteousness and justice. (Gen 18.19).

c. Consequences for moral conduct

1. The theological link established by the Abraham cycle between the covenant and universal responsibility permits us to pinpoint the particular vocation of God's people; set apart by means of a specific covenant, it consequently inherits a specific responsibility towards the nations, for whom it becomes the mediator of the divine blessing. This theological approach fruitfully describes the particular dimension and the universal validity of biblical morality.

2. The Abraham and the Jacob cycles insist on the historical dimension of moral living. Both Abraham and Jacob follow a course of conversion which the narrative carefully describes. The covenant offered by God meets with human resistance. These biblical narratives here show the temporal dimension in which faithfulness to the covenant and obedience to God are worked out.

2.2.3 The Covenant with Moses and the people of Israel

24. In our description of the progressive understanding of the covenant we underlined certain essential traits. The founding experience of the covenant occurs on Sinai. It is presented as a foundational historical event. It is entirely a gift of God, fruit of his unmerited initiative, and it binds both God (grace) and humanity (the Law). It confers on newborn Israel the status of a people with full rights. Once stipulated, it demands the free response of the human person, which should be first understood as the acceptance of a 'way of life' (the Law, in its theological meaning), then, only in consequence, as the practice of precise ordinances (the laws). We now present this response not in its theological and unchangeable totality (the Law), but in its multiple and detailed expression, as it is applied to changing circumstances (the laws).

2.2.3.1 The Decalogue

25. Every newly formed people must, first of all, provide itself with a constitution. Israel's 'constitution' reflects the simple life of the semi-nomadic clans of which it was originally formed. Apart from later retouchings and developments, 'the ten words' well reflect the essential content of the fundamental law of Sinai.

Its redactional position (Ex 20.1-17), immediately before the 'Covenant code' (Ex 20.22-23.19) and its repetition, with some variants (Deut 5.6–21), at the beginning of the 'Deuteronomic code' (Deut 4.44–26.19) already reveals its special importance within the whole complex of the 'Torah'. In Hebrew this word means 'instruction, teaching'; it therefore has a broader and deeper sense than our term 'law', despite the use of this term by nearly every translator.

Paradoxically, the original tenor of the Decalogue reflects an ethic which is at the same time primitive and potentially very rich.

a. A primitive ethic

26. Three aspects reveal the limitations of this ethic: its exteriority, its essentially communal nature and its mainly negative formulation of moral requirements.

1. In considering the literal sense, exegetes insist that originally every prohibition concerned external, visible and verifiable actions, including the hamad (desire) which introduces the last two commandments (Ex 20.17); the desire envisaged is no mere thought or ineffective and interior plan (a wish), but rather a concrete intention to put an evil plan into action (a desire

which is ‘expressed in action’, a ‘proposal’).

2. Moreover, once freed from Egypt, this liberated people was in urgent need of precise rules to order its collective life in the desert. The Decalogue corresponds broadly to this demand, in such a way that in it we can see a fundamental law, a primitive national charter.

3. Eight of the ten commandments are formulated negatively, they are prohibitions, more or less like railings on a bridge. Only two are expressed in positive form, precepts to be fulfilled. The accent lies, therefore, on abstaining from socially harmful actions. This evidently does not exhaust all the possibilities of morality, whose purpose is broadly that of stimulating human activity to good action.

b. A potentially rich ethic

27. Three other characteristics, however, make of the original Decalogue an irreplaceable foundation for an inspiring morality that appeal to modern sensibilities: its range is virtually universal. It fits the theological framework of the covenant; it is rooted in a historical context of liberation.

1. The scope of the commandments goes beyond the confines of a particular nation, even those of God’s elected people. The values they promote are applicable to the whole of humanity in any region and in any period of history. We shall see later that even the first two prohibitions, apart from the apparent specificity of the designation ‘the LORD God of Israel’, express a universal value.

2. The covenantal framework of the Decalogue subordinates ten commandments, as they are called, to the notion of the Law itself understood as a gift, as God’s gratuitous donation, a global ‘path’, a clearly traced way which renders possible and facilitates humanity’s radical orientation towards God, towards an intimate communication with him, towards happiness rather than misery and towards life rather than death.

3. In the introduction to the Decalogue the LORD sums up the narrative of his liberating act: he has led out his own from a ‘house’ in which they were ‘enslaved’ (Ex 20.2). Now a people that wants to be free of a suffocating external yoke and has just achieved this will be careful not to seek another enslaving and stifling internal yoke. The Decalogue, in fact, opens the way to a morality of social liberation. In Israel the appreciation of freedom is wide enough to include the earth itself, all cultivable land. Every seven years (sabbatical year) and further every forty-nine years (jubilee year) there is an obligation to let the earth rest, free from every violence, safe from every plough and ploughshare (cf. Lev 25.1–54).

c. Consequences for today’s morality

28 Can the Decalogue be used as a practical basis of a moral theology and catechesis that suit the sensitivities of today’s humanity?

1) Apparent limitations

The exteriority, the essentially communal nature and the mainly negative formulation of primitive Israelite ethics are features that hinder the Decalogue, presented on its own and exactly as it stands, from expressing adequately the ideal of moral life which the Church proposes to her contemporaries.

1. Under the influence of the discoveries of psychology, people today insist on the internal origin, even unconscious, of their external actions, in the form of thoughts, desires, obscure motives and unruly impulses.

2. Despite awareness of the demands of community life, at the same time they react against the imperatives of an unlimited globalization and put more emphasis on the individual, on the self, on the desire for personal development.

3. Moreover in the last few decades in many societies there is a kind of allergy to any form of prohibition, which is seen, often erroneously, as a limitation and restriction on freedom.

2) Real advantages

29. On the other hand the virtually universal range of biblical morality, its place in a theological covenantal framework and its roots in the historical context of liberation can have a certain attraction in our times.

1. Who never dreams of a system of values that transcends and unites nationalities and cultures?

2. The primary insistence on a theological approach rather than on a large number of behavioural precepts and prohibitions may arouse greater interest in the fundamentals of biblical morality among people who are allergic to laws that seem to limit personal liberty.

3. Awareness of the concrete circumstances in which the Decalogue took shape in history shows to what extent this basic and fundamental text, far from being restrictive or oppressive, in fact stands at the service of human freedom, both individual and collective.

3) Discovering values in obligations

30. The Decalogue contains all the elements necessary to provide a foundation for a balanced moral reflection suitable for our times. It is however not sufficient to translate it from the original Hebrew into a modern language. In its canonical formulation it has the form of apodictic laws detailing a morality of duties (deontology)

Nothing prevents us understanding the contents of the Israelite charter in a different but no less faithful manner, in terms of a morality of values (axiology). Transcribed in this way, the Decalogue acquires a greater clarity and contemporary appeal. Indeed, such an adjustment loses nothing but gains enormously in depth. Prohibitions concentrate only on avoiding certain ways of behaving, they encourage, at the most, an ‘emergency-brake’ morality (e.g. abstaining from adultery by not courting another man’s wife). Positive precepts, for their part, may go no further than some gesture or attitude to quiet the conscience; at most they may encourage a morality of minimal actions (e.g. the view that the dedication of one hour a week to worship constitutes observance of the Sabbath). A commitment to values, however, represents an open-ended project, whose demands are unlimited.

Translated into a terminology of values the precepts of the Decalogue point to the following values: the Absolute, religious homage, time, the family, life, the stability of the male and female couple, freedom (the Hebrew verb gnb probably refers to abduction not to the theft of material objects), good reputation, the household, the house and its material belongings.

Each of these values opens a ‘programme’, a moral demand that is never complete. The following propositions, each introduced by a verb, illustrate the dynamic to which each of these

values gives rise.

Three vertical values referring to the relationship of the human person to God

1. to offer homage to the one Absolute God

2. to respect the presence and the mission of God in the world (signified by ‘the name’)

3. to prize the sacred dimension of time

Seven horizontal values regarding the relationships between human persons.

4. to honour the family

5. to further the right to life

6. to safeguard the union of the couple, man and wife

7. to defend the right of each person to respect for his or her personal liberty and dignity

8. to safeguard the reputation of other people

9. to respect every individual (members of a household, family or group)

10. to leave to others their material goods.

The ten values seen in the Decalogue are presented in decreasing order of value, from the most to the least important, God in the first place and material goods in the last. Within human relationships family, life, and a stable marriage head the list.

This analysis therefore offers humanity in search of autonomy a legal and moral support that can prove both fruitful and stable. In our present situation, however, it may seem unattractive, as the popular scale of values commonly followed in today’s world runs contrary to the biblical proposal. It puts human beings before God. Indeed, material goods, economics in a certain sense, may stand at the head of the list. When a political and social system is founded, openly or not, on false basic values (or uncertainty about values), when commerce and consumerism are considered more important than personal relationships, that system is fractured from its very beginning, and doomed, sooner or later, to collapse.

By contrast, the Decalogue opens up a broad way towards a liberating morality, giving first place to God’s sovereignty over the world (values nn. 1 and 2), offering every individual the possibility of dedicating time to God and of managing time in a constructive manner (n. 3), broadening the opportunities of family life (n. 4), defending life, even an apparently unproductive life of suffering, against arbitrary decisions of the system and subtle manipulations of public opinion (n. 5), neutralizing the seeds of division that render married life so fragile, especially in our days (n. 6), preventing all forms of exploitation of the body, of the heart and of ideas (n. 7), protecting personal reputations from attack (n. 8) and from all kinds of deception, of exploitation, abuse and coercion (nn. 9 and 10).

4) Juridical Consequences

31. The ten values underlying the Decalogue offer a clear foundation for a charter of rights and

of freedom to the whole of humanity:

1. the right to a religious rapport with God,

2. right to the respect for beliefs and religious symbols,

3. the right to freedom of worship and secondly to leisure, to free time and to quality of life,

4. the right of families to just and protective policies, of children to support from their parents and to a training in work and social values, the right of elderly parents to respect and to support from their children,

5. the right to life (to be born), to respect for life (to live and die a natural death), to education,

6. the right of persons to free choice of a spouse, the right of the couple to respect, encouragement and support from the state and from society at large, the right of children to stability (emotional, affective, financial) from their parents,

7. the right to civil liberties (physical integrity, choice of life and career, freedom of movement and of expression)

8. the right to a good reputation, and secondly to respect for private life and unbiased information,

9. the right to domestic and professional security and tranquillity, and further to freedom of activity,

10. the right to private property, including the certainty of civil protection of material goods.

In the context of a 'revealed morality' however, these inalienable human rights are fully subordinated to the divine right, to God's universal sovereignty. The Decalogue begins with the words: "I am the LORD your God, who led you out of the land of Egypt." (Ex 20.2; Deut 5.6). This divine sovereignty, as it manifests itself in the founding event of the exodus, is exercised not according to an authoritarian and despotic manner, as so often occurs in the human control of rights and liberty, but rather in view of personal and community freedom. From the human side it implies, among other things, exclusive worship, a time devoted to personal and common prayer, the acknowledgement of God's supreme authority to order the lives of his creatures, to govern individuals and peoples, to exercise judgement. Finally, the biblical view of divine sovereignty propounds a world vision in which not merely the Church, but the cosmos, the environment and the totality of earthly goods belong, in the last resort, to God alone.

In short, building on the fundamental values contained in the Decalogue, moral theology and the consequent catechetical teaching are able to propose to today's humanity a balanced ideal that, on one hand never privileges duties to the detriment of rights or vice-versa, and, on the other hand, avoids the stumbling-block of a purely secular ethic that disregards the relationship of human beings to God.

5) Conclusion: Following Jesus' path

32. By presenting the Decalogue as the perennial foundation of a universal morality three important purposes are achieved: we open the treasures of the Word, we show its richness, we discover a language that appeals to the sensitivities of contemporary men and women.

Again, by proposing a reading of the founding Law on Sinai which underlines the values it contains, we are only following Jesus' footsteps. We list some salient elements :

1. In his Sermon on the Mount Jesus recalls certain precepts of the Decalogue, carrying them further from three points of view: a deepening, an interiority and a challenge to surpass oneself to the point of reaching a perfection that is almost divine (Mt 5.17–48).

2. In discussing cultic purity Jesus points out that a person becomes truly impure through that which emerges from the heart. It is this that impels an individual to act against the Decalogue (Mt 15.19).

3. The episode of the rich young man (Mt19.16–22 and par.) explains further this limitless generosity required by Jesus. From a minimal morality, essentially communitarian and negatively formulated (vv. 18-19), he passes on to a personalized programme of morality, consisting principally in 'following Jesus', and to a morality entirely concentrated on detachment, on solidarity with the poor and on the dynamism of a love whose source lies in heaven (v. 21).

4. When asked which is 'the greatest of the commandments' Jesus himself points to two biblical precepts founded on one value, the most important, love; they open up a limitless moral programme (Mt 22.34–40 and par.). Drawing out the richest sap from the two major legal traditions of the Old Testament (Deuteronomic and Priestly), Jesus admirably synthesizes the many laws symbolized by the very number of the 'ten words'. In symbolic language 'three' normally stands for wholeness in the divine sphere, invisible, while 'seven' stands for wholeness in the visible sphere. The value 'love of God' sums up the first three commandments of the Decalogue and 'love of neighbour' the other seven.

5. Following Jesus, Paul too, quoting precepts from the Decalogue, sees in the love of neighbour 'the entire fulfilment of the Law' (Cf. Rom 13.8–10). Again citing the Decalogue (Rom 2.21–22), he affirms in a lengthy discussion that God judges according to the same norm both Jews, instructed in the Law, and gentiles, who "do instinctively what the Law requires" (Rom 2.14).

2.2.3.1. The legislative Codes

33. This category usually comprises the Covenant Code (Ex 21.1–23.33), the Law of Holiness (Lev 17.1–26.46) and the Deuteronomic Code (Deut 4.44–26.19). They occur in close connection with the conclusion of the covenant on Sinai, and, together with the Decalogue, give concrete shape to the 'way of life' which these revealed and offered. We shall present three moral themes that appear to be specially relevant in these codes.

a. The poor and social justice

The apodictic laws of the Covenant Code, the Deuteronomic Code and the Law of Holiness agree in establishing measures destined to avoid the enslaving of the poor, as well as taking into consideration the periodical remission of their debts. These dispositions have at times an utopian dimension, as, for example, the sabbatical year (Ex 23.10–11) and the jubilee year (Lev 25.8-17). However, by imposing upon Israelite society the objective of combating and overcoming poverty, these laws recognize the difficulty of such a struggle (Deut 15.4 and 15.11). The battle against poverty presupposes the practice of an honest and impartial justice (Ex 23.1-8; Deut 16.18-20). This is applied in the name of God himself. Various theological approaches are employed to establish it. The apodictic laws of the Covenant Code take up the prophetic intuition of God's proximity to the poor. Deuteronomy, on its part, insists on the particular

statute about the land entrusted by God to the Israelites: Israel, beneficiary of the divine blessing, has the use but not the ownership of the land (cf. Deut 6.10–11). Consequently the exercise of social justice is presented as Israel's response in faith to the gift of God (Deut 15.1–11); the law controls the use of this gift and attests God's sovereignty over the earth.

b. The stranger

34. The Hebrew Bible uses different words to indicate strangers: ger denotes the stranger residing permanently among the Israelites; the term nokri applies to a foreigner in transit, while toshab and sakir indicate, in the Law of Holiness, paid foreign labourers. The solicitude for the ger appears constantly in the legislative texts of the Torah, either out of natural generosity as in Ex 22.20; 23.9, or out of a generosity recalling the deliverance from slavery in Egypt granted by God in Deut 16.11–12. It is the Law of Holiness, however, that formulates the most audacious rules regarding the stranger: the ger is no longer an 'object' of the law, he becomes a 'subject', responsible together with the local inhabitants of the land for its holiness and its purity. Local inhabitants and 'strangers' are therefore united in a common responsibility and by a bond described by the vocabulary of love (cf. Lev 19.33–34). The Holiness Code then legislates for the integration of strangers, or at least of gerim, into the community of the children of Israel.

C Worship and ethics

35 The prophetic literature first linked divine worship with respect for rights and justice. The preaching of Amos (5.21) and Isaiah (1.10–20) particularly are typical of this theological intuition.

The Deuteronomic Code juxtaposes cultic laws and prescriptions for social justice. The laws concerning the single sanctuary and the prohibition of idolatry (cf. Deut 12–13) precede the social injunctions in Deut 14.22–15.18, but they unite closely cultic and ethical imperatives. In this manner the triennial tithes, originally a cultic prescription, serve a new purpose given by the centralization of the cult in Jerusalem, that of providing for the sustenance of widows, strangers, orphans and Levites (cf. Deut 14.28-29; 26,12–15). Lastly, the pilgrimage feasts require the participation of the poor (Deut 16.11. 12 -14). Worship in the Jerusalem temple will therefore not be valid unless it is linked to social justice founded on the memory of the slavery in Egypt, Israel's deliverance and the gift of the land from God. The laws of the Torah, therefore, draw attention to the ethical implications of every religious celebration as well as to the theological dimension of social ethics.

The themes presented in this paragraph on 'moral teachings' stress that the legal codes of the Torah pay particular attention to social morality. Israel's concept of God leads to a special regard for the poor, for strangers and for justice. Thus worship and ethics are closely associated; adoration of God and solicitude for one's neighbour are two inseparable expressions of the same confession of faith.

2.2.3.3. The moral teaching of the prophets

36. Justice is a basic theme in all the prophets. However, they treat it never separately and systematically, but only in relation to God's guidance of Israel's history. This looks to both past and future. Since God freed Israel from slavery in Egypt and led her into her land, Israelites should live according to the commandments God gave Moses on Mount Sinai (cf. the framing of the ten commandments in Deut 5.1-6, 28-33). However, as they failed to follow this path and adopted the practices of the nations, God decided to raise up foreign invaders against them to

devastate their land and take them into exile (Hos 2; Jer 2.1–3.5). With regard to the future, God will save a remnant of the people from their diaspora among the nations and will lead them back to their land where they will at last live as a faithful community around the Temple in obedience to the old commandments (Is 4; 43). This basic connection between ethics and history, both present and future, is developed in Ezek 20, which constitutes the Magna Carta of a reborn Israel.

On the basis of God's presence in the history of Israel the prophets confronted the people with their way of life which was in complete contrast with the 'Law' of God (Is 1.10; 42.24; Jer 2.8; 6.19; Ezek 22.26; Hos 4.6; Amos 2.4; Zeph 3.4; Zech 7.12). This divine rule for Israel's conduct contained a variety of norms and customs derived from tribal and local legislation, from tribal traditions, from priestly teaching and wisdom instruction. The moral preaching of the prophets places its accent on the concept of social justice (mishpath,tsedaqah: Isa 1.27; 5.7; 28.17; 58.2; Jer 5.1; 22.3; 33.15; Ezek 18.5; Hos 5.1; Amos 5.7). The prophets brought Israelite society face to face with this human and divine model in all its demands: the various roles in a law-court from king to judge, from witness to defendant (Isa 59.1-15; Jer 5.26–31; 21.11-22.19; Amos 5.7–17), the corruption of the rulers (Ezek 34; Hos 4; Mal 1.6–29), the rights of various social classes particularly of the marginalized (Isa 58; Jer 34), the widening economic gap between landowners and impoverished peasants (Isa 5.8, 12; Amos 8; Micah 2), the dislocation between cultic practice and daily behaviour (Isa 1.1–20; Jer 7), and the degradation of public morality in general (Isa 32.1–8; Jer 9.1–9).

Lastly, to understand adequately the ethics of the prophetic writings we must bear in mind the fact that morality, both social and personal, ultimately derives from God himself, from his righteousness (Isa 30.18; 45.8; Jer 9.24; Zeph 3.5) and his holiness (Ezek 15.11; Isa 6.3; 63.10–11; Ezek 37.28; Hos 11.9).

2.2.4 The Covenant with David

37. This covenant is, in a special way, a pure gift of God. In so far as it does not depend on human dispositions, it lasts forever and finds its fulfilment in Jesus' messianic mission (cf. Lk 1.32–33)

It had its origin when the people asked God for a king, without realizing that God himself was their true king. God granted the institution of the monarchy (1 Sam 8; Deut 33.5). The king, however, is not placed outside God's covenant with his people, but is integrated into it, and his conduct must therefore follow the laws established by God. The purpose of David's kingship was to establish a different relationship with God (1 Sam 16.1–13; 2 Sam 5.1–3; cf. Deut 17.14–20). In the narrative the term 'covenant' does not appear. Nor does Nathan's promise contain any explicit condition. It is a strong promise. The Lord's commitment is absolute (2 Sam 7.1–17). In the case of failure on the part of David's successors, a failure which began with Solomon, God will castigate them, not as a punishment but as a correction. His paternal attitude towards David's descendants will never cease (2 Sam 7.14–15; Cf Ps 2.6–7). Therefore the reign of this elect of God will last for ever (2 Sam 7.13–16) because, according to the psalmist, God has sworn: "I will not violate my covenant." Ps 89.34).

2.2.5. The 'New Covenant' according to Jeremiah

38, Jer 31.31–34 is the only text that speaks explicitly of a 'new covenant':

"The days are surely coming...when I will make a new covenant...It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors...a covenant that they broke...But this is the covenant I will

make...I will put my law within them, ...and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another...for they shall all know me...for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sins no more."

The following points are to be noted:

1. At the beginning and the end come two assertions on the LORD'S intervention regarding the covenant: these brackets stress the novelty of the covenant on God's side in terms of forgiveness and not remembering. Israel itself will simply do nothing, no confession or expiation of sins, no initiative to return to God. The creation of a positive disposition on Israel's part is entirely the LORD's doing.

2. Two other characteristics of this new covenant are relevant. The Torah is now 'within' and 'written on the heart' (cf. Ezek 36.26–27). Therefore, 'all shall know' God, that is, they will have an intimate relationship with God, (note the intensive sense of the Hebrew verb) that includes the practice of righteousness (cf. Jer 22.15–16).

3. Two antitheses underline the specific character of the new covenant in comparison with that made with the ancestors in the desert. The latter, written on stone, was violated by that and succeeding generations; the former is absolutely new because it will be inscribed upon the heart. Moreover, the teacher will be the LORD himself, no longer human mediators.

4. In the middle of our text the covenant formula stands out, affirming that the LORD and his people belong to each other. This formula has not changed, it is still valid and constitutes the heart of the passage.

5. In sum, the new covenant has the same partners as the earlier covenant, the same duty to observe the Torah and the same relationship with the LORD. The above exegesis implies that the new covenant is uniquely the LORD'S pledge towards Israel, the people that endures through the centuries, although it is certainly true that the covenant undergoes many modifications in the various stages of Israel's history until it reaches its radical reform during the exile. The same conception of the covenant, characterized by God's unconditional fidelity, can be found also in other texts (Lev 26.44–45; Ezek 16.59–60), in the story of the golden calf (Ex 32–34) and in its parallel narrative (especially Ex 34.1–10).

6. The concept of the new covenant does not imply any opposition between the New Testament and the Old, or between Christians and Jews (cf. The Jewish People and their Sacred Scriptures in the Christian Bible, nn. 39–42). It does, however, mark a radical innovation in the history of the covenant. Through the pardon of their iniquity and the gift of the Holy Spirit the LORD now gives his people a natural disposition to live according to the Torah. For Christians this forgiveness is actualized in the saving death of Jesus for the remission of sins (Mt 26.28).

2.2.6. The moral teaching of the Sages

39. The purpose of the Wisdom Books is to teach human beings righteous conduct; they therefore constitute an important manifestation of biblical morality. Some of them are shaped more by human experience (e.g. Proverbs) and by reflections on the human condition, thus establishing a precious connection with the wisdom of other peoples, others have a closer association with the Covenant and the Torah. Qoheleth belongs to the first group, Ben Sirach to the second. As examples we shall discuss these two books.

a. The Book of Qoheleth

Qoheleth forms part of the wisdom movement. It is characterized by its critical approach. It begins with the observation: “Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity!” (1.2), an observation repeated in the conclusion (12.8).

The term ‘vanity’ literally means vapour or breath, and refers to all that is ephemeral, transient, incomprehensible, enigmatic. Qoheleth uses it to describe all the phenomena of human life. People live in a world over which they have no control, a world full of inconsistencies, of contradictions. Nothing that can be obtained in this world has an enduring value: wisdom, richness, pleasure, labour, youth, life itself. People may or may not receive what they deserve. Everything yields to the spectre of death, the only inevitable factor of life which no one can escape. Notwithstanding the inconsistencies and vicissitudes of life, human beings must accept their proper role in relation to God. This is the sense of Qoheleth’s admonition: “Fear God” (5.7).

Against the attempts and efforts of humans to overcome and to understand life, Qoheleth offers the realistic alternative of facing the fact that no control is possible, and of letting things run their own course. Only so can we hope to find joy and satisfaction in all we do. Seven times Qoheleth advises people always to rejoice when an opportunity presents itself (2.24–26; 3.12-13, 22; 5.18–20; 8.15; 9.7–10; 11.7–12.13), because this is the destiny given by God to palliate the miseries of life. Nowhere, however, is a hedonistic way of life recommended.

Although Qoheleth’s ethics do not aim at a radical change of structures, they do contain valuable elements of political and social criticism. The author points out certain scandals and abuses inherent in the monarchical system: the case of an aging king who becomes dictatorial and autocratic (4.13), the usurpation of power by a criminal or by an opportunist (4.14–16), the corruption of public administrators at the expense of the poor and of farm labourers (3.16; 4.1; 5.7–8), the useless multiplication of public functionaries lacking in wisdom (7.19), the granting of offices and of responsibility to the inept (10.5–7) and continual feasting in the court of an immature king (10.16). He further denounces anti-social ways of behaving: envy and competitiveness (4.4), idleness and laziness (4.5), fatigue and over-activity (4.6), individualism and avarice (4.7–12). In short, in this wisdom book, in many respects strikingly modern, we find a mine of useful reflections capable of inspiring a balanced way of life on both the personal and the collective level.

b. The Book of Ben Sirach

40. Sirach views wisdom not as only associated with human experience and deriving from God but also as intimately connected with the history of salvation and with the Torah of Moses (24.23). In this book both realities, revelation and experience, are combined and integrated without eliminating each other. In the same manner Sirach is able to present Israel’s heroes (44–59) as examples of wisdom and to insist on Torah observance, but to appreciate at the same time the beauty and the harmony of creation 42.15–43.33), to accept lessons from nature, and to build on the observations and the principles of the sages who preceded him.

The book is mostly a collection of various instructions, exhortations and maxims referring to the whole gamut of themes regarding a life of virtue and ethical conduct. There are duties towards God, domestic duties, social obligations and responsibilities, virtues to be practised and vices to be avoided for the formation of moral character. This writing in fact constitutes a kind of handbook for moral conduct; it acclaims Israel’s unique heritage and insists particularly on the call for God’s people to partake in a unique way in the wisdom of God, because they have at their disposal a special source of wisdom: the Torah.

The ‘fear of the Lord’ is the beginning and the crown, the perfection and the root of wisdom (1.14, 16; 18.20). For the author wisdom and fear of the Lord are practically synonymous and they manifest themselves in obedience to the Law of Moses (24.22).

Wisdom is also at work in developing family relationships: duties of children towards their parents (3.1–16; 7.27–28), of parents towards their children (7.23–25; 16.1–14); relationship with women: wives (7.19; 23.22–26; 25.12–26.18), daughters (7.24–26; 22.4–5), and women in general (9.1–9).

Wisdom also develops various aspects of social living: the distinction between true and false friends (6.5–17; 12.8–18), caution towards strangers (11.29–34), attitudes towards riches (10.30–31; 13.18–26), moderation and reflection in business affairs (11.7–11; 26.29–27.3) and numerous other matters.

For wisdom there is no area of life that is not worthy of attention. Everyday life is full of innumerable situations that require special approaches, of decisions and actions not controlled by general legislation. It is with this area that traditional wisdom is concerned. Convinced that the whole of life is under God’s control, Israel meets her Creator even in day-to-day living. Sirach combines personal experience and traditional wisdom with divine revelation in the Torah, with liturgical practice and with personal devotion.

The sages contemplate the world God created in all its beauty, order and harmony. These reveal something about their Creator. Through wisdom Israel meets her Lord in a living relationship open also to other peoples. The openness of Israelite wisdom to the nations and the clearly international character of the sages’ movement provides a biblical basis for dialogue with other religions and the search for a global ethic. The Saviour God of Jews and Christians is also the Creator who reveals himself in his creation.

3. The new Covenant in Jesus Christ as God’s final gift, and its moral implications

41. As we have seen in our explanation of the Old Testament, the concept of ‘covenant’ has a special place in the understanding and description of the relationship between God and the people of Israel. This term does not occur frequently in the New Testament. It is used thirty-three times, six of which are specified as ‘new covenant’. Decisive and fundamental for God’s relationship with the Israelite people and with the whole of humanity is, in the New Testament, the person of Jesus, his work and destiny. We shall now examine in the main writings of the New Testament how the gift God granted in his Son Jesus Christ manifests itself, and its consequent orientations for morality. We shall conclude with the Eucharistic texts, through which Jesus intimately relates his own person and his ‘way’ to the new covenant.

3.1. The coming of God’s Kingdom and its moral implications

3.1.1. The Kingdom of God: main theme of Jesus’ preaching in the Synoptics

42. Jesus made the Kingdom of God a central metaphor for his earthly ministry, conferring upon it an added intensity, expressed through the qualities of his teaching and of his mission. Understood as the equivalent of the presence of God himself who comes to conquer evil and transform the world, the kingdom of God is pure grace, discovered like a treasure hidden in a field or like a pearl of great value ready to be bought (Mt 13.44–46); hence it is not a natural right, nor can it be merited.

a. The expression ‘Kingdom of God’

At the root of this term lies the conviction, basic to biblical faith, that God is the sovereign Lord, an idea acclaimed in the Psalms and in other books of the Bible (cf. Pss 93.1-2; 96.10; 97.1; 99.1; 103.19; 145.13; Isa 52.7).

Though not a common or a prevalent theme, the ardent wish for the coming kingdom was present in post-exilic Israel in the form of the desire for the coming of God to remove the threats and injustices experienced by the people. The notion of God's kingdom has an essentially communal character (derived from a political concept embracing the whole of the community of Israel), an eschatological one (an experience of God's presence which transcends any other experience of kingship) and a soteriological meaning (the conviction that God will overcome evil and will transform the life of Israel). While the term is only marginally and sporadically used in the Old Testament and in Jewish literature, it becomes a central motif in Jesus' teaching and mission.

b. The present and future dimension of the Kingdom of God

43. New Testament interpreters have long observed that Jesus' teaching on the kingdom of God has both a future and a present aspect. Some sayings and parables of Jesus describe the kingdom as a future event not yet realized. This is expressed, for example, in the petition of the Lord's prayer: 'Thy kingdom come', as also in the key text of Mk 1.14–15 (Mt 4.17) that describes God's kingdom as 'near' or 'nearing', but not yet present. The beatitudes themselves, with their promise of a future blessing and justification, present the kingdom as an event yet to occur.

At the same time there are certain kingdom sayings of Jesus that speak of it as something in some way already present. A key saying, in both Matthew and Luke, associates the experience of the kingdom of God with Jesus' healings and exorcisms: "But if it is that by the Spirit of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you." (Mt 12.28; Lk 11.20). The well-known logion in Lk 17.21 "The kingdom of God is not coming with things that can be observed; nor will they say, 'Look, here it is!' or 'There it is!' For, in fact, the kingdom of God is among you." also draws attention to the present and unexpected character of God's kingdom.

This carries important implications for Christian morality. The future reality of the kingdom invades (and determines) the present situation. The real and definitive destiny of humankind, when evil will have been vanquished, justice reinstated and humanity's craving for life and peace fully satisfied, remains a future experience, but the contours of this future – a future that reveals God's entire purpose for humanity – contribute to defining what human life should be already in the present. Hence values and virtues that conform us with the will of God, to be fully affirmed and revealed in the future kingdom of God, must be practised now as far as possible in the sinful and imperfect circumstances of the present life, as the parables of the net and of the wheat and weed teach (cf. Mt 13.24–30, 36–43, 47–50). This reflects the essentially eschatological dimension of Christian life and ethics.

Jesus not only proclaims the nearness of the kingdom of God (Mt 4.17) but also teaches us to pray "thy kingdom come" and "thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Mt 6.10). Such a longing for God's coming and for humanity to be moulded by God's will also points to the theological foundation of Christian ethics, and echoes the whole tradition of the Bible ("You shall be holy, because I, the Lord, your God, am holy." Lev 19.2).

c. The Kingdom of God, the new Covenant and Jesus' person

44. The kingdom of God does not come with the usual manifestations of royalty. It can be discovered only in Jesus and his mission, and in the characteristic virtues of which he offers an

example during his ministry. In the actions of Jesus, referred to above (Mt 12.28; Lk 11.20), God's kingdom is experienced. His exorcisms and his healings effect a real defeat of evil and of the Evil One's power over the body and over the human person; such is the liberation associated with God's kingdom. Jesus' ministry also expresses his compassion for the sick who crowd around him (cf. Mt 9.35–36), whom he welcomes into the Kingdom of God (Mt 4.23–25; 15.29–31). Such a welcome exemplifies Jesus' teaching on the kingdom (e.g., the parables on mercy in Lk 15 and on the banquet in Lk 14).

Although the expression 'new covenant' is rare in the Synoptics, it does occur in connection with the kingdom of God. In the institution of the Eucharist Jesus says: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." And immediately adds: "I tell you, I will never again drink of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it new with you in my Father's kingdom."(Mt 26.28-29). At the banquet of the kingdom, in perfect communion with Jesus and with the Father, the new covenant reaches its fullness and the promise "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31.33b; cf. Rev 21.3) will be fulfilled entirely.

Through Jesus God also brings to fulfilment two other characteristics traits of the 'new covenant', though this phrase is not mentioned explicitly: the forgiveness of sins (iniquity) and knowledge of God (Jer 31,34).

In an episode related by all three Synoptics Jesus presents his mission to sinners as an essential part of the mission with which God has entrusted him (Mt 9.2–13 parr). Jesus forgives the sins of a paralytic who, with great faith and no less effort, is brought to him, thus provoking deep indignation among some scribes. It is only after this that he heals the paralytic with his word and interprets the healing itself as a confirmation of his power to forgive sins. He then stresses that this authority is not restricted to a single episode, but is the basis of his universal mission with the words: "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. Go and learn what this means, 'I desire mercy not sacrifice'. For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (Mt 9.12–13). It is by God's will that Jesus came, and it is God who wants mercy; through Jesus God shows his mercy and grants the pardon of sins, thus fulfilling a basic trait of the new covenant (cf. Jer 31.34b).

The other promise "they shall all know me" (Jer 31.34a) is fulfilled in an eminent way in Jesus. Of his relationship to God he says: "All things have been handed to me by my Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." (Mt 11.27; Lk 10.22; cf. Jer 22.16). As Son of God Jesus receives from the Father an exclusive knowledge of God as Father; he has also received the exclusive commitment to reveal, that is to make known, God as Father. In this way the promise in Jer 31.34a receives its fulfilment through Jesus, the Son of God who knows the Father perfectly, and access to an intimate and perfect knowledge of God is given. This knowledge also grants full understanding of the 'kingdom of God', sometimes called "the kingdom of their (or 'my') Father" (Mt 13.43; 26.29), that constitutes the main theme of Jesus' message,.

Forgiveness of sins or reconciliation with God, the knowledge of God and communion with him emerge as the principal purpose of Jesus' activity as presented by the Synoptics. These distinctive traits of the new covenant in Jer 31.31-34 form an essential part of the proclamation of the kingdom of God. Jesus as Son knows the Father in a complete and exclusive manner and lives in the most intimate communion with God. This unique relationship with God underlies his principal tasks. His activity also shows the way in which God communicates his definitive gift and fulfils his promise of the new covenant.

Jesus' central position in the relationship of men and women to God is the basis also of his central position for moral living. In his own person he represents not only the kingdom of God and the new covenant, but also the Law itself, because he is guided in the most perfect way by God's will (cf. Mt 26.39, 42), to the greatest manifestation of his love, the shedding of his blood. This is the model for all action in his Spirit and for walking in the way of God.

3.1.2. The proclamation of God's kingdom and its moral implications

45. Jesus announces the gospel of God when he says: "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has drawn near", he then immediately adds the exhortation to act accordingly: "repent, and believe in the good news." (Mk 1.15). He proclaims the nearness of the kingdom of God, to be heard and accepted through conversion and faith. A change of mentality is needed, new ways of thought and a new vision, conditioned by God's kingdom, perceived through the wisdom of faith.

The principal purpose of Jesus' mission is to reveal God, the Father (Mt 11.27), and his reign, his way of acting. This revelation occurs throughout the whole of Jesus' mission, by his preaching, his mighty works, his passion and his resurrection.

Acting in this way, Jesus reveals at the same time the norms of righteous human behaviour. He affirms this connection by saying: "Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect." (Mt 5.48); he thus sums up and founds his teaching about the love of enemies (Mt 5.43-48) and the whole section of antitheses (Mt 5.21- 48). We shall present some aspects:

a. Jesus as Guide

46. Jesus manifests his authority to show the right way for human conduct specifically by the call of the disciples. All four gospels place this call at the beginning of Jesus' ministry (Mt 4.18–22; Mk 1.16–20; Lk 5.1–11); Jn 1.35–51). With the invitation "Follow me!" (Mk 1.17) he presents himself as a guide who knows both the destination and the way to reach it; he offers at the same time to those whom he calls, communion of life with him and the example of how to tread the way he indicates. He thus shows what is meant by the preceding command "Repent and believe" (1.15); the disciples live out their conversion and their faith by accepting his invitation and by placing their trust in his guidance.

The path traced by Jesus is not presented as an authoritative norm imposed externally. Jesus himself walks along it and asks no more of the disciples than to follow his example. Moreover, his relations with the disciples do not consist in dry and disinterested lecturing. He calls them 'sons' (Jn 13.33; 21.6), 'friends' (Jn 15.14–15), 'brothers and sisters' (Mt 12.50; 28.10; Jn 20.17), and not them alone, for he invites all men and women to come to him and to enter a close and cordial communion of life with him (Mt 11.28–30). In this communion of life with him they learn from Jesus the way of right conduct, they partake of his Spirit and walk along with him.

The relationship of Jesus with his disciples is not something limited in time, it is a model for all generations. When Jesus sends the eleven disciples to the universal mission he mentions his all-embracing authority and says: "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age." (Mt 28.18–20). All members of all peoples to the end of the age are destined to become Jesus' disciples. The relationship with and the experience of Jesus' person lived by the first disciples and the teaching imparted to them

serve as a pattern for all ages.

b. The Beatitudes (dispositions specially stressed)

47. A whole list of fundamental virtues and dispositions is to be found in the beatitudes. Matthew records eight, Luke four, at the beginning of the first and longest of Jesus' discourses (Mt 5.3–10; Lk 6.20–22); they present them as a sort of synthesis of his teaching. The beatitudes belong to a literary genre used in the Old Testament and other parts of the New Testament. They attribute joy and happiness to certain persons and dispositions, often in connection with a promise of future blessing. In both gospels the first beatitude concerns the poor, the last one those who suffer persecution; Jesus declares them possessors of God's kingdom, thus creating an intimate connection between the central theme of his message and the dispositions which he highlights. In Matthew (5.3–10) the beatitudes mention the poor in spirit, that is, those who live in a precarious situation and, above all, acknowledge that they themselves have nothing, are wholly dependent on God. Then come the afflicted who do not turn in upon themselves but compassionately participate in the necessities and sufferings of others. Next come the meek who do not use violence but respect their neighbours just as they are. Those who hunger and thirst for righteousness desire intensely to act according to God's will in expectation of the kingdom. The merciful offer active help to the needy (cf. Mt 25.31–46) and are ready to grant pardon (Mt 18.33). The pure in heart seek the will of God with integral and undivided commitment. The peacemakers do everything in their power to maintain and re-establish love-inspired fellowship among human beings. Those persecuted for righteousness' sake remain faithful to the will of God despite the consequent difficulties.

These virtues and dispositions correspond to the teaching of Jesus in all the gospels and also reflect the behaviour of Jesus himself. For this reason following Jesus faithfully leads to a life animated by these virtues.

We have already recalled the close connection between human dispositions and God's action in the first and last beatitudes. This association is, however, to be found in all the beatitudes, for each one speaks in its promise, sometimes rather indirectly, of God's 'future action': God will console, he will give the land as inheritance, he will satiate, he will have mercy, he will admit into his vision, he will acknowledge them as his sons and daughters. In the beatitudes Jesus does not establish a code of abstract norms and duties about right human conduct, but by presenting norms for human conduct he reveals at the same time God's future action. Therefore the beatitudes constitute one of the most compact and explicit revelations about God that is to be found in the gospels. They present God's future action not only as a recompense for the conduct prescribed, but also as basis and motive that render it both possible and reasonable. Poverty in spirit or fidelity under persecution do not stand as obligations on their own. Those who accept with faith Jesus' revelation on God's way of acting, summarized in the proclamation of the kingdom of God, are not left to themselves but will be enabled to recognize their complete dependence on God, to suffer persecution rather than strive to save their lives at all costs.

We cannot of course mention all models of conduct that appear in the actions and teaching of Jesus. We shall only recall Jesus' strong insistence on pardoning those who have become our debtors (Mt 6.11, 14–15; 18.21–35), the concern for children (Mk 9.35–37; 10.13–16), and solicitude for simple people ((Mt 18.10–14). Most of all discipleship of Jesus implies determination not to be served, but to serve. Jesus gives the example of this requirement: "For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many." (Mk 10.45). The service of Jesus is limitless and includes the sacrifice of his life. Jesus' death on the cross for all humanity constitutes the highest expression of his love. For this reason the invitation to discipleship does not mean following Jesus only in his actions, in his style of life

and in his ministry; it includes the invitation to participate in his suffering and in his cross, to accept persecution, even to die a violent death. This appears clearly in the request Jesus addresses to all, to the disciples as well as to the crowd: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” (Mk 8.34).

3.2. The gift of the Son and its moral consequences according to John

3.2.1. The Gift of the Son, expression of God’s saving love.

48. The Son came and comes because he is sent by the Father: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” (Jn 3.16). The Son has come, and keeps on coming, as the Spirit who announces “the things that are to come” (16.13) constantly explains. From his very first coming the Son is moved by the desire to enter into a relationship with humanity, to help it overcome its solitude; it needs him, perhaps even unconsciously. Accepting his coming brings salvation.

a. Jesus’ Coming

Jesus’ presence introduces a new order into human life. The manifesto of this transformation can be seen in the dialogue with Nicodemus (Jn 3.1-21). In the gospel John’s favourite vocabulary consists of expressions on new life and new birth, and in the first Letter, of statements on our status as sons of God, born of God, and in both writings of terms indicating ‘remaining in’ (beginning with the parable of the vine and the branches) and the opposition between flesh and spirit. The newness Jesus brings is the fruit of a gratuitous gift that begs to be accepted; those who refuse it are guilty and place themselves outside the order of salvation. The gravity of this refusal is a consequence of the source of this gift: it is ultimately the refusal of God’s loving sovereignty revealed in the coming of his envoy.

b. Jesus’ Revelatory Signs and Discourses

49. A particular way of showing the revelation of Jesus is the ‘sign’ (semeion in Greek), endowed with the particular power that manifests itself in the miracle. The literary structure of the miracle-story is itself significant. Each story begins with a situation of need, fear and danger, more often of suffering, which is later overcome. Jesus makes the transition from a wedding at which wine is lacking to a feast where wine flows in abundance (2.1–11); from a dangerous sickness (4.46–54), or a long-standing one (5.1–9) to perfect health; from the hunger of a large crowd to its satiety (6.1–15); from blindness to light (9.1–7); from the tomb of death to life (11.1–44). The meaning of these passages is explained in detail by means of Jesus’ discourses on the multiplication of loaves (6.22–70), the healing of the man born blind (9.8–41) and the raising of Lazarus (11.1–44). These explanations are summarized by Jesus in his remarkable sayings about his own person: “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” (6.35). “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” (8.12). “I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.” (10.9). “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep.” (10.11; cf. 10.14-15). “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. (11.25–26). “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (14.6). “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” (15.5).

In these sayings Jesus discloses what God the Father has given to humanity in the person of the

Son. Jesus is bread, light, gate, shepherd, resurrection and life, way, truth and life, and vine. At the same time he shows what people should do to draw benefit from the gifts his presence brings: come to him, believe in him, follow him and remain in him. He also reveals the gifts he grants: life, deliverance from darkness to confident sight, triumph over death by resurrection, knowledge of the Father and full communion with him. Though the terms may differ, they express the gifts of the new covenant, the knowledge of God (light, truth), the law (gate, shepherd, way), and the ensuing fruit, life. All this is present in the person of Jesus and is granted by him integrally and organically, as symbolized by the relationship between vine and branches.

3.2.2. The life of the Son and its moral implications

50. Confronted by the appearance of the Son of God in history human beings are invited to express their total acceptance and open themselves to salvation. Acceptance is expressed by means of a total life-commitment.

a. Following the Son's example

The model of this behaviour is the Son's own comportment: he conforms his will to that of the Father by accepting and carrying out his mission: his food is to do his Father's will (4.34), he does everything that is pleasing to the Father, whose word he observes (8.29, 55). He says whatever the Father has commanded him to say (12.49). Jesus' life is a model for others, to be followed by those who 'worship in spirit and in truth' (4.24).

No less than his words, Jesus' actions are exemplary. This is especially true of his will to serve (cf. the foot-washing, 'I have given you an example' 13.15), and by the offer of his own life (15.13: 'giving one's life for one's friends' - the saying is general, but it is an application of the preceding commandment to 'love one another ... as I have loved you'). Jesus' authority makes his actions a model for imitation and the foundation of a moral obligation. Equally basic is the commandment, which he puts forward as the criterion of the disciple's love ('They who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me.' 14.21). The high point of imitation is the mission undertaken by disciples in imitation of Jesus (20.21) as proof of love of the Lord (21.19).

The Johannine parenesis takes Jesus as a norm for all conduct, in accordance with the teaching of Jesus himself: "Whoever says, 'I abide in him,' ought to walk just as he walked." (1Jn 2.6).

b. Faith in Jesus and brotherly love

51 Jesus' coming brings change with it; a new anthropological and soteriological situation requires a new mode of conduct. Faith is the great 'novelty' required, it consists in self-abandonment and 'coming' to Jesus, abandoning the illusion of self-sufficiency and acknowledging one's blindness and need of Jesus who is light, changing the habitual tendency to 'judge according to appearances', relinquishing personal autonomy in answer to God's call to obtain freedom (as sons) and overcome sin.

Faith goes hand in hand with love of brothers and sisters. Even this additional element in the mystery of Jesus has its origin in the Father's love. The Father loves Jesus, Jesus loves the disciples, the disciples must love one another. This new reality has the power to become a sign (Jn 13.36) and to help overcome death (1 Jn 3.14). Love is the 'fruit' of faith (Jn 15.8).

Whoever believes in Jesus and loves his brothers and sisters 'does not sin', that is, does not live

in sin (1 Jn 3.6); though we all have our weaknesses, and as such we are sinners, though "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jn 1.7).

Whoever believes in Jesus and loves his brothers and sisters 'knows God' truly, for only someone 'who observes his commandments' (1 Jn 2.3) and does what Jesus did truly knows God: "He laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another."; conversely: "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." (1 Jn 4.8).

Whoever believes in Jesus and loves his brothers and sisters has understood fully that 'God is love' (1 Jn 4.16), a culminating truth that will be grasped by everyone only in the measure in which believers love one another, especially the needy, "not in word or speech, but in truth and action"; on the other hand: "How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?" (1 Jn 3.17-18)

This anthropological dimension of faith in Jesus coincides with the critique of false religion on the part of the prophets, summarized in Hosea's dictum (6.6): "I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, and knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." (hesed = stability and loyalty; knowledge is that which leads to righteousness cf. Jer 22.15–16).

Therefore John's ethic is a radical ethic of love modelled on the gift of the life of Jesus and is born in the house of faith, Christological faith, as a witness to everyone. This love means commandment, instruction, Torah, as in all biblical ethics. Love is God's project for all his sons and daughters, a project that must be taken up in the struggle against the evil power which impels in the opposite direction. It is this Love and this Faith that 'overcome the world' (cf. 1 Jn 5.4).

c. Responsibility towards the World

52. Concentration on the personal response to God's offer in Christ may have suggested that Johannine ethics have an exclusively individualistic dimension. The importance of the community corrects this impression; evil has a collective aspect (cf. the meaning of 'world' in John), but also goodness has a collective origin and purpose. The community of believers is made up of individuals, but so is that of 'the world', to which the work of salvation is directed. This involves not only Jesus' own intervention, but also the participation of those who belong to him. Though the brotherly love 'commanded' by Jesus (Jn 13.34; 15.12–17; 1 Jn 2.10–11; 3.11, 23; 4.7–12) is directed more towards the brothers and sisters in faith, awareness of the universal mission is a decisive element in the responsibility for the saving rather than the condemnation of the world.

This of course highlights the relevance for John which the practice of love has for the salvation of the world; the Church and the Christian are ceaselessly sent into the world, that the world may believe, and faith is born precisely from the practice of love ("By this everyone will know....Jn 13.35). It is not only the individual Christian but the whole community that has a new mysterious activity - like the wind of which we "do not know where it comes from or where it goes" (Jn 3.8) - that attracts the world's attention to itself in order to bring people to believe and to lead them to this same practice of love.

3.3. The gift of the Son and its moral implications in the Pauline corpus and other Letters

3.3.1 God's gift according to Paul

53. For the apostle Paul moral life cannot be understood except as a generous response to love

and to the gift God gave us. God, who wants to make us his sons and daughters, sent his Son and put into our hearts the Spirit of his Son crying Abba, Father (Gal 4.6; cf. Eph 1.3–14), so that we may no longer walk as captives of sin but 'according to the Spirit (Rom 8.5); for "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit". (Gal 5.25).

Believers are therefore invited to render ceaseless thanks to God (1 Thess 5.18; Eph 5.20; Col 3.15). When Paul exhorts believers to lead a life worthy of their call he does so by putting before their eyes God's enormous gift to them, since that moral life does not fully make sense except as an offering of self to God in response to his own gift (Rom 12.1).

3.3.2. Paul's moral teaching

54. In his writings Paul insists on the fact that the moral conduct of believers is a consequence of the grace of God which has justified them and enables them to persevere. Because God has pardoned and justified us he accepts our moral conduct as a witness to the salvation operative within us.

a. The experience of the love of God as basis of morality.

55. The well-spring of Christian morality is not an external norm but the experience of God's love for every individual, an experience of which the apostle constantly reminds us in his letters so that his exhortations may be understood and accepted. He founds his counsels and exhortations on the experience made of Christ and of the Spirit without external impositions. If believers are to allow themselves to be illuminated and guided internally, if exhortations and counsels can do nothing else but ensure that they keep in mind the love and pardon they have received, the reason is that they have experienced God's mercy towards them in Christ, are intimately united with Christ and have received his Spirit. We can formulate the guiding principle of Paul's exhortations by saying that the more believers are guided by the Spirit the less they need to be given rules of conduct.

A confirmation of Paul's approach is to be found in the fact that he does not begin his letters with moral exhortations, nor does he answer directly the problems of the recipients of his letters. He puts a distance between the problems and his answers. He takes up the great trends of his gospel (e.g. Rom 1–8), shows how his readers should develop their understanding of the gospel, and only then does he proceed to formulate his counsels regarding the various difficulties encountered by these young Churches (e.g. Rom 12–15).

One may ask if Paul would have written in this manner today, when the majority of Christians have never experienced God's infinite generosity towards them and find themselves in the situation of a purely 'sociological' Christianity.

In this context another question arises. Has too broad a separation been created in the course of centuries between the moral imperatives presented to believers and their roots in the gospel? In any case it is important today to formulate anew the relationship between the norms and their theological motivations in order to achieve a better understanding of how the presentation of moral norms depends on the presentation of the Gospel.

b. Relationship with Christ as a foundation for the conduct of believers

56. For Paul the determining factor of moral activity is not an anthropological concept, that is, a certain idea of human nature and human dignity, but rather the relationship of individuals with Christ. If God justifies every human person through faith alone, without the works of the Law,

this certainly does not happen so that all may continue to live in sin: “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?” (Rom 6.2). But death to sin is death with Christ. We find here a first formulation of the Christological foundation of the moral conduct of believers, a foundation that is expressed as union but at the same time implies a separation; united to Christ believers are now separated from sin. What is important is the assimilation of the journey of believers with that of Christ. In other words the principles of moral conduct are not abstract but derive from a relationship to Christ that has made us die to sin together with him. Moral conduct is founded directly on union with Christ and on the indwelling of the Spirit, from whom it comes and whose expression it is. Thus, basically this behaviour is not dictated by external norms, but derives from a strong relationship which, in the Spirit, unites believers with Christ and with God.

Paul also draws moral implications from his unique and characteristic assertion that the Church is ‘the body of Christ’. For the apostle this is more than a simple metaphor, it acquires a quasi-metaphysical status. As the Christian is a member of the body of Christ, to commit fornication unites a prostitute’s body with that of Christ (1 Cor 6.15–17). Again, as Christians form the one body of Christ, the various charisms must be exercised in harmony, with mutual respect and love and with special attention to the more vulnerable members (1 Cor 12–13). Further, when celebrating the Eucharist Christians must not abuse or disregard the body of Christ by giving offence to the poorer members (1 Cor 11. 17–34); cf. below, nos. 77 – 79 on the moral implications of the Eucharist).

c. Principal attitudes towards Christ the Lord

57. As the relationship with Christ is so fundamental for the moral conduct of believers Paul explains what their attitude towards the Lord should be.

Texts exhorting to love Christ are infrequent in the Pauline writings, but two decisive verses do assert that the Lord Jesus Christ must be loved: “Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord!” (1 Cor 16.22), and “Grace be with all who have an undying love for our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Eph 6.24).

This love is no inoperative sentiment. It should express itself in action, derived from Christ’s most frequently used title, ‘Lord’. The title ‘Lord’ is the opposite of ‘slave’, whose role is to serve. ‘Lord’ is a divine title conferred on Christ, and Christians are called upon to serve the Lord (Rom 12.11; 14.18; 16.18). This relationship between believers and Christ profoundly conditions their own interrelationships. It is not right, for example, to exercise judgment over a slave who belongs to this Lord (Rom 14.4, 6–9). The relationship in ancient society between master and slave is relativized (1 Cor 7.22–23; Phm; cf. Col 4.1; Eph 6.5–9). Instead, it is appropriate for one who is a servant of the Lord, to serve out of love those who belong to this same Lord (2 Cor 4.5).

As the divine title ‘Lord’ has been conferred on Christ the dispositions which in the Old Testament believers had towards God are now directed towards Christ: belief in him (Rom 3.22, .26; 10.14; Gal 2.16; cf Col 2.5–7; Eph 1.15), hope in him (Rom 15.12; 1 Cor 15.19), love for him (1 Cor 16.22; cf. Eph 6.24) obedience towards him (2 Cor 10.5).

The right conduct that corresponds to these attitudes towards the Lord derives from his will, manifested in his words, and especially in his example.

d. The example of Christ

58. Paul's moral instructions are not uniform. He indicates forcefully and with great clarity which actions are dangerous and exclude from the kingdom of God (cf. Rom 1.18; 1 Cor 5.11; 6.9–10; Gal 5.14); he rarely refers to the Mosaic Law as a model for conduct (cf. Rom 13.8–10; Gal 5.14); he makes use of the moral models of the stoics which his contemporaries deemed good or bad; moreover he transmits some rulings of Christ on specific problems (1 Cor 7.10; 9.14; 14.37) and he refers to the saying "Bear one another's burdens" as 'the law of Christ' (Gal 6.2).

More frequent are the references to the example of Christ, to be imitated and followed. Paul says in a general way: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Cor 11.1). When he urges the Philippians to be humble and not to seek only their own interests, he writes: "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus!" (Phil 2.4–5), and describes at the same time the whole process of the humiliation and glorification of Christ (2.6–11). He presents as a model the generosity of Christ, who made himself poor in order to make us rich (2 Cor 8.9), as well as his gentleness and meekness (2 Cor 10.1).

Paul throws into relief particularly the binding power of Christ's love, that culminates in the passion: "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them." (2 Cor 5.14–15). Following Jesus leaves no room for 'one's own life' with its projects and desires, but only for a life in union with Jesus. Paul claims for himself such a way of living: "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."(Gal 2.20). These sentiments are found also in the exhortation to the Ephesians: "Live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God." (Eph 5.2; cf. 3.17; 4.15-16).

c. The guidance of the Spirit in decisions of conscience

59. Though Paul rarely asks believers for discernment, he indicates that all decisions are to be taken with discernment, as we can see at the beginning of the parenetic section of Romans (12.2). Christians must use discernment, because the decisions to be taken are not always evident or clear. Discernment consists in examining, under the guidance of the Spirit, whatever is better and perfect in every circumstance (cf. 1 Thess 5.21; Phil 1.10; Eph 5.10). By urging believers to discern, the apostle makes them responsible and sensitive to the delicate voice of the Spirit within them. Paul is convinced that the Spirit manifested in Christ's example and alive in Christians (cf. Gal 5.25; Rom 8.14) will enable them to decide on the most appropriate course to follow in every circumstance.

3.3.3. Following Christ according to the Letters of James and Peter

60. These letters belong to the corpus of the so called 'Catholic Epistles', addressed not to one particular community but envisaging a broader readership.

a. The Letter of James

The Letter of James takes for granted the saving work of Jesus, but is especially interested in the moral life of the members of the Christian community. The central theme of the letter is the true wisdom that comes from God (1.5) as opposed to false wisdom. Both conceptions are illustrated in 3.15–17: "Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind, But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full

of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

The wisdom from above, the moral teaching revealed from on high, is not human but divine. Human beings can only analyse it, enter into it more profoundly and put it into practice. It is an objective morality. 'Earthly, unspiritual and devilish' (3.15) wisdom, on the contrary, serves only to justify immoral behaviour. Earthly wisdom is a permanent temptation in people who want to decide for themselves what is right and what is wrong.

The letter is also a manifesto for social justice. Respect for the dignity of every human person is fundamental, especially that of the poor, who are particularly exposed to humiliation and contempt by the rich and powerful. This evidently takes up the defence of the poor undertaken by the prophets, Amos and Micah especially, but it also takes on a Christological dimension. The author summons to "faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ, Lord of glory" (2.1). The dignity of the glorious Christ guarantees the dignity of every Christian redeemed by his blood, and excludes every kind of favouritism.

James insists much on bridling the tongue (1.26; 3.1–12) going so far as to affirm: "Anyone who makes no mistake in speaking is perfect, able to keep the whole body in check with a bridle." (3.2). Teachers have a special responsibility within the Church (cf..3.1) since they can create dissent and divisions in the Christian community by their instruction (and their writings). Those with a strong and decisive influence on public opinion also have a similar responsibility.

b. The First Letter of Peter

61. This letter speaks at length of Jesus Christ, of his passion and resurrection and of his future coming in glory. From this derives the true principles for Christian living. The first theme is baptism (1.3–5), a sign of conversion and regeneration. Death to sin must be complete, just as is the consequent rebirth to new life. Christians are regenerated 'by the word of God' (1.23) and, as 'living stones', form "a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (2.5). These 'spiritual sacrifices' coincide with the entire Christian life, lived as such because it is animated and guided by the Spirit.

Believers should not adapt themselves to the godless society in which they live, in which they are 'aliens and exiles' (2.11). They shall abstain from 'the evil desires of the flesh' (2.11), from the godless way of life (cf. 4.3), and rather lead the godless, by means of good works, to the point of 'glorifying God when he manifests himself' (2.12). Despite their differences from it, they are called to enter into the society in which they live, and to subject themselves 'to all human authority for love of the Lord' (2.13). The same attentive participation in society may be seen in the rules regarding various relationships of life: state, family, marriage (2.13–3.12).

If Christians are persecuted and must suffer for righteousness' sake they are encouraged and sustained by recalling the violent death of Christ (3.13; 4.1). Even in these circumstances they must not isolate themselves: "Always be ready to make your defence to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence." (3.15-16). Because they participate in the sufferings of Christ they are exhorted to "be glad and shout for joy when his glory is revealed." (4.13).

Beside these norms of conduct in a godless environment, exhortations also occur regarding life within the community. It should be marked by prayer, charity, hospitality and the exercise of every charism that helps the community. All should be done "so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ." (4.11).

3.3. The New Covenant and its moral implications in Hebrews

3.4.1. Christ, mediator of the New Covenant

62. Of the thirty-three times the 'covenant' is mentioned in the New Testament, seventeen are to be found in the letter to the Hebrews, which instances the covenant with Moses (9.19–21), quotes the prophecy of Jeremiah in full (8.8–12), mentions Jesus as the mediator of the new covenant (8.6; 9.15;12.24), and speaks of the 'new' (8.8; 9.15; 12.24), the 'better' (7.22; 8.6), the 'eternal' (13.20) covenant. In his letter the author describes God's initiative through Jesus his Son to bring the new covenant to fulfilment.

a. The Perfect Mediator, the New Moses

To bring us into a new relationship with himself, God chose his own Son as the perfect, ultimate and definitive mediator. The central proposition is already to be found in the prologue: "God has spoken to us by his Son." (1.2).

The author presents a synthesis of salvation history, describing the divine action to establish the covenant and pointing out the two aspects of the paschal mystery: "When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high."(1.3). The Son removed the obstacle that hindered a covenantal relationship and established the definitive covenant between God and ourselves.

Christ, Son of God (1.5–14) and our brother, (2.5–18), by the very constitution of his being is the mediator of the covenant. He receives the title of 'high priest' (2.17), to whom is assigned the fundamental function of mediating between God and humanity. Two adjectives are added to this title, 'faithful' and 'merciful', which indicate two essential and necessary qualities for establishing and maintaining a covenant. 'Faithful' refers to the ability to place the people in relationship with God, 'merciful' expresses the ability to understand and to offer fraternal help to human beings. The mystery of Christ embraces attachment to God and fraternal solidarity, two aspects of a new covenantal dispensation.

b. The 'New Covenant', founded on Christ's sacrifice

63. Jeremiah's announcement of the new covenant did not go as far as to explain the way in which it would be instituted and what the founding event would be. The author of Hebrews clearly proclaims: "When Christ came as a high priest of the good things that have come, then through the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands, that is, not of this creation), he entered once for all into the Holy Place, not with the blood of goats and calves, but with his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption." (9.11–12). Christ entered into the true sanctuary, was led into God's intimacy, opened the way to God, established communication between humanity and God, and put into effect the definitive covenant. By what means? 'With his own blood', meaning by his violent death which constituted an offering; so by the offering of his own life, constituted a means of perfect union with God and total solidarity with humanity. In this way Christ 'obtained eternal redemption' for many, the liberation from sins, the basic condition for the institution of the new covenant.

In 10.1–18 the author describes the effect, the saving value, of Christ's sacrifice and presents it as the decisive action that has radically changed the situation of humanity before God. He insists on the removal of faults: sins are remembered no longer (10.17); they have been pardoned (10.18). The two most significant expressions that define this saving efficacy from the positive point of view are the gifts of holiness (10.10) and of perfection (10.14).

Therefore, the single offering of Christ has a double effect: it confers perfection both upon Christ and upon ourselves. In his passion and resurrection Christ was both passive and active, he received and effected perfection, that is, the perfect relationship with God, and at the same time he communicated it to us, or rather, he received perfection in order to impart it to us, thus establishing the new covenant.

3.4.2. The demands of the gift of the New Covenant

64. Those who, through Christ's oblation, have received pardon for sin and have been sanctified, thus forming part of the new covenant, now find themselves in a new situation which demands a new code of conduct; the author details its characteristic traits and demands in 10.19–25. This text contains two parts, the first is descriptive (vv. 19–21), the second exhortative (vv. 22-25). The descriptive section defines the new situation created by Christ's mediation. It presents the new covenant above all as the amazing gift God has given us in Christ, and at the same time shows us three advantages this brings us: a right of entry, a way and a guide (indicative). The second part makes known the demands and invites us to take up the three attitudes of faith, hope and charity; we must accept the gift of God actively (imperative). The text presents by way of example the very close connection between the divine gift which precedes and the human obligations which follow, respectively indicative and imperative.

a. Progressing in our relationship with God

65. We are all invited to approach God and to enter into intimate contact with him. First of all a personal union with God is required. This is achieved by the practice of the three theological virtues since these are closely and directly related to the new covenant.

The first condition for approaching God is adherence to him in faith through the priestly mediation of Christ. The invitation to 'fullness of faith' (10.22) is based on the perfect efficacy of the sacrifice and of the priesthood of Christ, that lead people into true communion with God. The fullness of faith is obtained "with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with clean water" (10.22). This refers to the sacrament of baptism in both its external rite and its internal efficacy. With these words the author points to the radical change from the old to the new covenant, a transition to a more interior covenant. The sprinkling with Christ's blood reaches into a person's heart (cf. Jer 33.33; Ezek 36.25), it delivers from evil dispositions, transforms and renews.

The second condition required is hope (10.23), closely connected with faith (cf. 11.1); it expresses the dynamic aspect of faith, since the message we receive is a revelation not of an abstract truth but of a person who is both the way to and the cause of salvation. We live in the hope of obtaining our eternal inheritance and entering for ever into God's rest.

Lastly, the author exhorts to love (10.24–25). There is a very close relationship between covenant and love. This love has two dimensions, union with God and union with one's brothers and sisters, both fundamental for the new covenant. These verses invite us to be attentive towards one another in order to progress in an effective love which issues in the works of love. They also stress the need faithfully to attend meetings of the community.

b. A sacrifice of praise to God and of service to brothers and sisters

66. In many of his exhortations the author shows to those who have drawn near to God what their right conduct should be: they will have to bear persecution and sufferings, to remain firm in faith and patient in hope (10.32–39) and they are called to seek peace with everyone as well

as to strive for holiness (12.14–17).

Following other exhortations regarding right conduct we find a synthesis of Christian moral life in close connection with the sacrifice of Christ and his mediation: “Through him, then, let us continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God.” (13.15–16).

Christian worship is implemented principally through Christian living. It is truly Christian because it is mediated by Christ, ‘through him’ (11.13), and consists in uniting the Christian’s own life to Christ’s sacrifice in order to raise it to God. This takes place in two ways, both necessary, that correspond to the two facets of Christ’s sacrifice: through his sacrifice Christ glorified God and saved his brothers and sisters. In this same way Christians should praise God and serve their brothers and sisters. Christ showed perfect union with God’s will (cf. 5.8; 10.7–10) and a generous solidarity with all humanity (cf. 2.17–18; 4.15). Through him and with him the entire life of Christians should consist in a transformation of their own life, living in obedience to God, and in a generous gift of themselves to their brothers and sisters.

3.5 The Covenant and the task of Christians according to the Book of Revelation

3.5.1. A Covenant that traverses history

a. Covenant and Kingdom: their development in history and their goal

67. The starting-point of the covenant as the Book of Revelation presents it is the Sinaitic and Davidic covenants, understood and lived in the perspective of the new covenant announced by Jeremiah (Jer 31.33; cf. Ezek 36. 26-28).

The author, by passing continually backwards and forwards between the Old and the New Testaments shows their continuity. He reinterprets the covenant as God’s pledge to achieve through Christ and with Christ the closest possible union with humanity, expressed in the formula ‘You are my people and I am your God’ (Jer 31.32; Ezek 36.28). The first explicit reference to the covenant which we meet in the Book of Revelation is in 11.19 when “God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple”. This occurs at the conclusion of the great festival of praise (11.15–18), which celebrates the fundamental event: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah.” (11.15).The accomplishment of the kingdom in the human world is solemnly signified by the appearance of the ark.

In the last concluding reference to the covenant the author takes up once more Jeremiah’s and Ezekiel’s formula which he sees accomplished in New Jerusalem, the spouse-city: “And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (21.2). He immediately gives an explanation of this vision: “And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them as their God; and they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them’.” (21.3).

This extension of the old formula of covenant comes as a surprise. The basic reference to the Christ-Lamb as bridegroom and to Jerusalem as spouse, taken up once more in 21.9, sheds light on its various details: the tent and the fact that ‘God will pitch his tent among mortals’ recall the words in John 1.14: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us.” Through the action of the Christ-Lamb (5.9) the old formula regarding a single people is now extended to a plurality of

peoples: ‘they will be his peoples’. Above all, it is through Christ and his activity that the God of the old covenant, who became ‘God with us’, now becomes ‘their God’.

3.5.2. The task of Christians

68. Both covenant and kingdom are a gift of God and of Christ; this gift however, is brought into being in its two aspects through the co-operation of Christians themselves. At the very beginning of the Book of Revelation this is expressed in the acclamation addressed to Christ: “To him who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.” (1.5–6). This brings out the aspect of Christ’s love; the Christian community perceives itself as the object of this love. The foremost effect of Christ’s redemptive work is also stressed: human beings are constituted a ‘kingdom’ and ‘priests’ (cf. also 5.9–10). Love on Christ’s part and the redemption form one aspect of this reciprocal covenant, while the other two terms, kingdom and priests, refer to the kingdom. The latter two terms will be our starting point.

a. Christians ‘constituted a kingdom’

69. By their baptism Christians, freed from their sins, belong exclusively to Christ who constitutes them as a kingdom (cf. 1.5–6). It is a developing kingdom, implying an ever closer union to Christ. It is toward this growing perfection that the exhortations to repentance in the first section of Revelation are directed (chs. 1–3). As we shall see in more detail further on, the Risen Christ, addressing the Church in the first person, delivers commands to improve, consolidate and convert her. All that the Risen Christ requires of each of the Churches in Asia Minor applies in a broader way to the Church in all ages. In each of the Letters to the Churches a dialectic is observable between the local Church and ‘the Churches’, i.e. the universal Church. The Church develops her union to Christ in the measure that she accepts this message, thus becoming ever more a kingdom, ever more able to follow the Christ-Lamb and act accordingly.

b. Christians constituted ‘priests’ and ‘victors’

70. Christians, made into a kingdom, are thereby qualified as priests (cf. 1.5; 5.10). The song in 5.10 is addressed to the Christ-Lamb; in the language of Revelation, this denotes the Risen Christ, endowed with the fullness of Messianic power, who endows humanity with the fullness of his Spirit. It is Christ as Lamb who constitutes Christians priests. This unusual title (also 1 Pt 2.1-10) indicates, beside the purity required of Christians and the dignity to which the kingly status raises them, their role as mediators between God’s covenantal plan and its realization in history, culminating in its definitive fulfilment in the kingdom. Indeed, precisely in virtue of their priestly quality, Christians are ‘reigning on earth’ (5.10), not in the sense of enjoying an already completed kingship, but by their active task of establishing the kingdom of God and of Christ and of bringing it ever more fully to reality.

The active mediation of Christians is exercised in the actual course of history, in which the confrontation between good and evil unfolds, between the system of Christ and the worldly systems opposed to the kingdom and the covenant and activated by the power of evil. In association with the victory that Christ, present and active in human history, is even now gaining, the activity of the Christian will similarly obtain victory over evil. Christians exclude from the framework of their existence all negative decisions that counter, or contradict, or threaten, the kingdom in its initial stages. This moral tension of bringing the kingdom to perfection, combined with the permanent conversion which this implies will preserve Christians from regressing. The engagement of Christians as conquerors, in the sense of their participation in the victory which Christ is gaining over the worldly structures opposed to the covenant, will

inspire them to take a whole chain of initiatives.

The first of these is prayer, to which Revelation attributes a decisive role in building up the kingdom of God. United with the prayers of the martyrs (cf. 6.9–11), the prayers of Christians on earth rise to God's presence, and God responds with his interventions in history (8.1–5). In Revelation prayer comprises both individual praise and choral celebration. It often takes the form of a passionate petition, such as might be expected from a Christian, who, attentive to the developments of history, sees what is lacking in the areas of morality and the kingdom.

Together with prayer another task of the Christian is personal witness; as permanent bearer of 'the commandments of God' and of 'the witness of Jesus (12.17; 19.10), the Christian confronts the structures in history which oppose the kingdom and the covenant. Christians will emerge as victors with Christ, through his power. They will achieve this by their word, but above all by their life, which they are ready to offer as a gift (cf. 12.11). For the Book of Revelation the Christian is always a potential martyr.

At the prompting of the Spirit, Christians may also assume the properly prophetic role of denouncing the worldly systems which they encounter. The Book of Revelation traces the main qualities of a prophet (cf. 11.1–13): they must first of all be dedicated to prayer, then, endowed with power by the Spirit and all the irresistible force of the word of God, denounce like the prophets of old the aggressive moves against the kingdom and the covenant made by worldly structures. They may even be required to follow Christ unto the end, thus making the paschal event their own. They may be martyred, but even after their death will exercise a decisive impact on history.

c. "The righteous deeds of the saints" (Rv 19.8)

71. In the context of the activities undertaken by Christians one feature should be noted that runs through them all, named by the author of Revelation as "the righteous deeds of the saints" (19.8). This denotes all those initiatives of justice with which the saints enrich history by their activities. All these deeds of righteousness contribute towards the development of the kingdom, at the same time have a decisive effect on the outline of the covenant. The author interprets them as 'the linen' (19.8) with which the Church, the betrothed, will weave her nuptial garments when, in the last times, she becomes the spouse.

d. A sapiential reading of history

72 The active discipleship to which the Christian is called is intimately linked to the events of history. For a Christian's prayer, prophecy, witness and any other deed to make a real contribution to justice, a balanced interpretation of the signs of the times is required. From the very first section of Revelation we find, together with the insistence on the formation of a kingdom, a persistent emphasis on the interpretation of history. This is a crucial factor in Revelation's whole view of the Christian life. History must be read with one eye on the religious principles and values which God has revealed and continues to reveal, and the other on concrete events. A reading of these events within the framework of the religious values and principles which throw light on them conveys an interpretation belonging to the wisdom genre. Indeed, the Book of Revelation gives this name both to the wisdom by which God and the Christ-Lamb guide the evolution of history (cf. 5.12; 7.12), and to the ability of Christians to discern this transcendent wisdom in their day-to-day activities, as they plan their lives by applying these principles to their actual situations. This is the purpose of the sevenfold repetition of the admonition of the Risen Christ "Let everyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches" (2.7, 11, 17, 29; 3.6, 13, 22). It is the purpose also of the symbolic scenes

expressing the great religious principles, intended to illustrate and illuminate the most varied historical situations. Their interpretation and application opens the way to a sapiential reading of day-to-day history. In the light of such a view of history Christians apply their prayers, their witness, their prophecy and other initiatives suggested for each occasion to a sapiential reading of events. In this way the Christian will contribute to the eventual accomplishment of the kingdom, and will grow in that reciprocated love of Christ which is a feature of the covenant.

c. Conclusion

73 For the Book of Revelation the covenant represents a gift of God that branches out into the whole of human history. Through Christ's authority over history God achieves the partnership characteristic of the new Jerusalem, whose realisation requires the full development of the kingdom. Covenant and kingdom correspond to each other, running through history on converging lines until they finally meet. Seen from this end-point the kingdom represents the full realisation of Christ's value-system in which he and the Father are united. The expression of this situation in interpersonal terms is the reciprocity of the realized covenant, experienced as love. God's gift of the covenant is presented in the Book of Revelation as an underlying driving force that impels the development of the history of salvation toward its final conclusion.

3.3. The Eucharist, synthesis of the new Covenant

3.6.1. The Eucharist as gift

74. As we said above, the aim of a new covenant is developed by the prophet Jeremiah (31.31–34; cf. Ezek 36.26–28). The effect of God's decisive action "I will put my law within them" (v. 33) will be that "they shall all know me" (v. 34). Jeremiah, however, does not indicate the means by which God will produce this interior transformation.

a. Jesus' death as the basis of the new Covenant

The Synoptics and Paul do indicate the means by which God actually brings about the internal transformation announced by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jesus, the Suffering Servant of God (Lk 22.27; Jn 13.4–5, 13–17), anticipating with eloquent signs the supreme gift which he is about to give, offers the chalice with his blood and explains it as 'my blood of the covenant' (Mt 26.28; Mk 14.14; cf. Ex 24.8), or, as Luke and Paul put it: "This cup is the new covenant in my blood." (Lk 22.20; 1Cor 11.25).

When he gave the Eucharist to the Church Jesus gave himself, thus defining the meaning of his passion and resurrection. He has transformed death, that human event which effects total disintegration, into a most potent instrument of unity. A person's death normally creates an irreversible separation between the deceased person and those he leaves behind, especially in the case of one condemned to death. In the Last Supper, however, Jesus gives a completely opposite meaning to his violent death; he makes it the occasion and the basis of his ultimate act of love, an instrument of communion with God and his brothers and sisters, through which he establishes the definitive covenant.

The words of institution: "Drink from it, all of you; for this is my blood of the covenant" reveal and produce a transformation in the meaning of death. He is offered up as life-giving nourishment. 'The blood that is shed', death itself, is no longer seen as a fatal disaster but becomes a 'remembrance', the permanent presence of one who is condemned only to return. Beginning on that "night in which he was betrayed" the one judged becomes the one who judges us, "so that we may not be condemned along with the world." (1 Cor 11.32).

b. The Eucharistic elements create a community

75. This sacramental gesture expresses in a special way the effectiveness of the sacrifice on the community. Jesus transforms himself into food and drink for every individual (cf. John 6.53–58). Therefore his sacrifice not only makes him pleasing to God but the very way in which it is signified and achieved manifests also how it benefits us; it puts us in an intimate communion with Jesus, and through him with God. The banquet of the 'New Covenant' in which Jesus himself becomes food fulfils the aspect stressed by Jeremiah, God's deed that transforms persons from within. The command 'to eat the flesh of Jesus' and to 'drink his blood' is perfectly suited to its purpose and shows in the fullest possible manner God's inward activity foretold by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. It is not limited to a privileged group but brings into reciprocal communion all those who are invited. This shared meal excludes no one, as the body 'is given for you' and the blood 'shed for you'. In fact, any 'sym-posium' implies the dynamic of a reciprocal communication between the persons present, with mutual acceptance, with warm and brotherly relationships. This is even more so as the Eucharistic banquet is not the result of a meeting between equals but has its origin in the call of Christ, who sheds his blood for all, and obtains what no one, or even everyone together, could ever have obtained; 'the forgiveness of sins'. (Jer 31.34; Mt 26.28).

This profound reality of the Supper of the Lord made such an impression on the faith of Christians that Paul himself, who always respects the duality of the Eucharistic elements (1Cor 10.16), fascinated by the concentrated reality created by the sacrament, at a certain moment focuses on one of these elements: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of one bread." (1 Cor 10.17). This one body is the Church.

The Lord had said of the Eucharistic bread: "This is my body." (1 Cor 11.24), and Paul declares of the Corinthians: "You are the body of Christ." (1 Cor 11.20) The one is inseparable from the other; to separate them "is not really to eat the Lord's supper" (1 Cor 11.20).

c. The Eucharist as gift

76. The Eucharist is entirely a gift, the gift par excellence. In it Jesus gives himself, his own person. He gives his body that was given up and his blood that was shed; this means that he gives himself in the supreme act of his life, precisely when he laid down his life in perfect dedication to God and in complete commitment to the human race. Jesus gives himself in the bread and in the wine as food and drink, signifying the intrinsic change which is a feature of the new covenant (Jer 31.33). Through this Eucharistic union we enter simultaneously in the closest communion with both God and one another. It is impossible to combine this profound and vital union with Jesus with conduct towards God and other people which obviously contrasts with the conduct of Jesus himself .

3.6.2. Implications of the Eucharist as communion

77. Faced by the inappropriate conduct of the Corinthians even at the Eucharistic celebration Paul reflects on the nature and on the meaning of the Eucharist itself, and develops the criteria for right conduct. The way he indicates centres no longer on law or letter, it is a person, an act, a spirit, all realized and present in Jesus. It would be incoherent and contradictory to receive this total gift of Christ in the sacrament and unite oneself intimately with his person and with his body, that is, with all other members of the Christian community, and at the same time to separate oneself from them, by despising them and refusing to share with them the life and goods of the community.

a. Living communion in the Eucharist

The celebration of the new covenant must take place in full continuity with one's life if it is not to become a mere show. It has a moral dimension that touches on daily living.

For this reason the precise cause of the Corinthians' guilt must be analysed. They did not abuse the Eucharist in the sense of profaning it by failing to treat it as a sacred reality. Their responsibility consisted in the fact that they took no account of the implications of the Eucharist's communitarian aspect and of their personal communion with the Lord: whoever despises his neighbour, united with the Lord in this mystery, cannot claim to value the Lord aright.

In practice, the Corinthians removed from the covenant offered by the Lord its very 'newness', by suffocating it in the rigid economic and social categories of a godless society.

b. A meal not for the perfect but as a remedy against faults.

78. Paul criticises the divisions among the Corinthians as incompatible with the Lord's Supper, but he does not outlaw the celebration of the Eucharist. A suspension of the celebration of the Eucharist until ecclesial communities are in perfect union and free from sin would prevent the fulfilment of Christ's command, "Do this in memory of me" (1 Cor 11.24, 25). Paul himself links the two factors: "Indeed, there have to be factions among you, for only so will it become clear who among you are genuine believers." (1 Cor 11.19). By means of this link established between the Eucharist and moral conduct the Pauline text brings out its continuity with numerous passages in the Old Testament that insist on the relationship between worship and morality (Cf. above nos. 35-36).

Because of the defects which exist in the community, the Eucharist will always be a stimulus not to rest content with this situation. Thus Paul indicates it as an occasion for everyone to 'examine himself' (1 Cor 11.28) so that "When we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world." (1 Cor 11.32). In the very first Eucharist, too, celebrated by Jesus himself, he felt constrained to reprove the defects of his followers. "And a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest." Lk 22.24). The two travellers to Emmaus were enmeshed in dreams of political Messianism, but this did not prevent Jesus from explaining the Scriptures to them and revealing himself to them in 'the breaking of the bread'. (24.35).

For Paul too, the sad events in Corinth did not result in a despairing abstention from the Eucharistic celebrations, but presented an opportunity for an examination of conscience, both of individuals and of the community, for formulating an 'imperative' to make the necessary changes, and to leave room for the 'indicative' of divine power, active in the new covenant, to put into action its unitive work in the body of Christ.

Unless there is obstinate resistance on the part of individuals or the community, participation in the Eucharist will always be a strong call to conversion and the best means to give new vitality to the covenant which renews the life and the conduct of the Church, and through the Church, of the world.

c. The dynamism of the Spirit of Christ

79. In the Eucharist Jesus gives himself to the community of those who take part in his own supreme event, in his total dedication to God and in his unlimited commitment to sinful

humanity. By giving himself Jesus communicates his Spirit, the Spirit of Christ (Rom 8.9; Phil 1.19). Such a gift requires, from free beings, an active acceptance, an adaptation of self to the Spirit of Jesus, a mode of conduct in the Spirit. Paul goes so far as to say: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." (Gal 5.25).

We are not speaking here about an externally imposed imperative to be obeyed from one's own resources; it is an interior impetus given by the very Spirit of Jesus. The ongoing challenge to open ourselves to the Spirit of Jesus is always with us, to allow him to determine our actions and to follow him. The Spirit, living in Jesus and communicated by him especially through the gift of the Eucharist, becomes a dynamic reality within the hearts of Christians, provided they do not resist its activity.

Paul views the Corinthians' behaviour as endangering the central element of the Christian faith, the presence and the activity of the Spirit of Christ in the hearts of the faithful. They have preferred the old privileges and class-division to the Spirit of Christ, a Spirit of love and solidarity, thus coming to despise those who possess nothing (1 Cor 11.22). Hence the apostle's strong reaction, dictated by the same cares he expresses to the Galatians: "Having started with the Spirit, are you now ending with the flesh?" (Gal 3.3).

The presence and the interior dynamism of the Spirit does not dispense Christians from their own decisions and vigorous efforts. In completing his work of redemption, Jesus himself, who possesses and gives the Spirit, was not exempt from an arduous struggle. His example should inspire those who become partakers of the new covenant in his blood.

4. From gift to forgiveness

80. Fundamental in this context are God's gift, beginning with creation, its manifestation in the various expressions of the covenant leading to the mission of the Son, the revelation of God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit (Mt 18.19) and the offer of perfect and endless communion with God. Such a gift also comports an invitation to accept it, for it implicitly shows us the right way to receive it and it renders us capable of a fitting response. In our description of revealed morality we made a point of showing that God accompanies his gifts with the revelation of the right path to be followed and of the fitting manner of accepting them.

The Bible itself witnesses to the fact, however, that from the very beginning, human beings did not do justice to the gift of God, refusing to walk the way indicated by God and preferring their own false ways. This takes place in the whole of human history, in every generation up to the crucifixion of the Son of God, the rejection of his missionaries and the persecution of believers. The Bible is the narrative of God's initiatives, but at the same time it is the story of human wickedness, weakness and failure. The question cannot be shirked, what is God's reaction to this human response? Does God make the offer only once? Do those who do not accept it in the right manner lose it for ever and inexorably perish in their rebellion, separated from God, the source of life?

In these circumstances the books of the Bible explain how God's giving is followed by his forgiving. God does not act as judge and as implacable vindicator, but takes pity on his fallen creatures. He invites them to repent, to do penance, and he forgives their faults. It is a fundamental and decisive feature of revealed morality that it does not consist in a rigid and inflexible moralism. Its guarantor is a God who is full of mercy, who wishes not the death of the sinner, but that he turn and live (Ezek 18.23, 32).

We shall present the principal facts of this favourable and saving state of affairs in which

forgiving is combined with giving and constitutes the sinner's only hope. The Old Testament amply attests God's willingness to forgive, which reaches its climax in the mission of Jesus.

4.1 God's forgiveness in the Old Testament

81. Sin and failure, penance and expiation play an important role in the daily life of God's people. This is evident in the fundamental narratives about the origin of evil in the world (Gen 2–4; 6–9), the rebellion of Israel (Jer 31; Ezek 36) and the acknowledgement of God's sovereignty by the whole world (Is 45.18–25). The range of rich and expressive terms used of sin and forgiveness as well as the elaborate ritual of expiation point to the same reality. However, it is not easy to express in our modern categories the anthropological and theological dimensions of the process by which the relationship between God and his people is restored.

a. Two essential presuppositions

As a starting-point two concepts are fundamental. Firstly, fault and pardon are not merely matters of juridically imputing and condoning debts. On the contrary, they are factual realities. Evil deeds produce cosmic distortion. They go against the order of creation, and balance can be regained only through actions that restore the world order. Secondly, this conception of an inherent connection between cause and effect has its consequences for God's activity in pardoning. God is not a dour creditor intent on putting his accounts in order, but a benevolent Creator who restores human beings to their pristine condition of being loved by him, and mends the damage inflicted on the cosmos. These two premises contrast with the merely juridical categories of sin and forgiveness prevalent in our culture. They must be taken seriously, otherwise we lose the key to the understanding of the message of God's mercy. The reality of this expiation finds expression in several metaphors, for example, 'casting all sins into the depths of the sea' (Mic 7.19), 'cleansing from sin' (Ps 51.2), or 'redemption from iniquities' (Ps 130.8).

b. The priestly tradition

A detailed theology of forgiveness was developed in priestly circles, particularly in the form found in Leviticus and Ezekiel, and more specifically in connection with the word 'to cover (kapper) sins'. The Book of Leviticus presents the legislation regarding the cult, with its various offerings corresponding to the different categories of sins and impurities (Lev 4–7). The major rite is, of course, the ritual on the day of atonement, when the goat for the LORD is offered in sacrifice for the sins of the people and the goat for Azazel is sent out into the desert to carry away with it the iniquities of Israel (Lev 16). The law about this ritual is to be found exactly in the centre of the five books of Moses and determines the principal cultic activity instituted to ensure the presence of the LORD among his people in the tent in the desert (cf. Ex 40).

It is fundamental to the priestly tradition that the rites of atonement are not presented as means to obtain God's mercy, in the sense of a human deed able to influence his will to pardon or to oblige him to do so. Rather, these rites represent an objective sign of God's forgiveness (blood as a sign of life, cf. Gen 9.4).

Reconciliation itself however, is a pure initiative of God's transcendent generosity towards the repentant sinner, as Lev 16.30 explains: "For on this day atonement shall be made for you, to cleanse you; from all your sins you shall be clean before the LORD".

c. The characteristics of reconciliation

It is against the background of this priestly teaching that many statements found throughout the Old Testament, about reconciliation between human beings and God, are to be understood. It is exclusively the Lord who forgives sins (Ps 130.8). His mercy embraces all Israel (Ezek 32.14), even the wicked generation in the desert (Ex 34.6–7), Jerusalem his own city (Is 54.5–8) and all the other nations (Jon 3.10). Pardon is always unmerited, it derives from God's holiness, the attribute that distinguishes the Lord from all earthly beings (Gen 8.21; Hos 11.9). God's pardon effects a creative renewal (Ps 51.12–14; Ezek 36.26–27) and brings life with it (Ezek 18.21–23). It is always offered to Israel (Is 65.1) and can be nullified only by the refusal of the people to turn to the Lord (Jer 18.8; Amos 4.6–13). According to the Decalogue God's patience towards sinners is so amazing that it reaches to the third and fourth generation, in confidence that they will depart form their evil ways (Ex 20.5–6; Num 14.18). Lastly his pardon ends every punishment (Is 40.1–20; Jon 3.10), since its sole purpose was to recall sinners to God: "Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, says the Lord God, and not rather that they should turn from their ways and live?" (Ezek 18.23; cf. Is 4).

4.2 God's forgiveness in the New Testament

82. The New Testament writings all agree on the central truth that God granted his pardon through the person and work of Jesus. We shall expound this message in some detail as it is found in Matthew, then more briefly in some of the other New Testament writings.

a. Jesus the Saviour from sins (Matthew)

The evangelist Matthew underlines the fact that Jesus' mission consisted in the task of saving his people from their sins (1.21), calling sinners (9.13) and obtaining pardon for sins (26.28).

Before Jesus' birth Joseph is informed by the angel of the Lord of Mary's condition and his own task; he receives the charge: "You are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (1.21). In this basic and programmatic way the child's main mission is expressed in his name itself. The name Jesus ('Yeshua' or 'Yehoshuah' in Hebrew) is usually understood to mean 'The Lord saves'. Here the gift of salvation is specified as the forgiveness of sins. In Ps 130.8 the supplicant confesses: "It is he (God) who will redeem Israel from all its iniquities". From now on God acts and pardons sins through the person of Jesus. The coming and the mission of Jesus have forgiveness as their focus and attest unambiguously that it is God who forgives. In the two following verses, Matthew points to the fulfilment of scripture: "They shall name him Emmanuel, which means, 'God is with us'." (1.22–23). Jesus frees from sin, he removes that which separates us from God and at the same time renews communion with God.

In his meeting with a paralytic Jesus explicitly accomplishes this mission of his. He does not heal him immediately, but only says, with warmth and tenderness: "Take heart, son; your sins are forgiven." (Mt 9,2). Some scribes who were present are aware of the gravity of the moment and in their hearts accuse Jesus of blasphemy, of having claimed for himself a divine prerogative. In answer Jesus insists on his authority of which he presents proof in the form of the healing itself: "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins..." (Mt 9.6). This incident is immediately followed by the call of the tax-collector (9.9) and the banquet of Jesus and his disciples with many tax-collectors and sinners. Against the protest of the Pharisees Jesus presents himself as a physician and as an expression of the mercy God wants: "For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners." (9.13). Here too, everything tends towards forgiveness, Jesus expresses this with the well-known words to the sick sinner, with the call to follow him and to the common meal, that it, to communion.

Before ending the last supper, Jesus hands the cup to his disciples saying: "Drink from it, all of

you; for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins." (My 26.28). He thus reveals the manner in which he obtains the salvation of his people from their sins. By shedding his blood, sacrificing, that is, his own life, he establishes the new and definitive covenant and obtains pardon for sins (cf. Heb 9,14). The actions Jesus requires of his disciples, eating his body and drinking his blood, are pledges of their union with him, and through him with God, a union that will be perfect and imperishable in the kingdom of the Father (Mt 26,29).

b. Jesus' redemptive mission in other New Testament writings

83. We shall refer briefly to the gospel of John, to Romans, to Hebrews and to the Book of Revelation. It is striking that at the beginning of these writings the mission of Jesus related to the forgiveness of sins is almost always emphasized.

At the very first appearance of Jesus John the Baptist introduces him as: "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." (Jn 1.29). The world, the whole of humanity, is permeated with sin: God has sent Jesus to free the world from this sin; the motive that has brought about the sending of the Son by the Father is his love for a sinful world: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." (Jn 3.16–17). Again in the opening of his first Letter John attests: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin." (1 Jn 1.7), and goes on to say: "If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and the word is not in us." (1 Jn 1.9–10).

Paul speaks about God's forgiveness achieved by Jesus especially in his Letter to the Romans: "....since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood." (Rom 3.23–25). It is faith in Jesus that renders forgiveness of sins and reconciliation with God (cf. Rom 5.11) accessible to all (cf. 3.26). In Paul too, the love of God for sinners is the motive for God's gift of his Son: "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us." (Rom 5.8).

Also the introductory paragraph of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the state of the Son through whom God has spoken in the last times (Heb 1.1–4), making mention of the decisive act of his mission: he has accomplished 'the purification of sins' (1.3). In this way the letter emphasizes its principal theme from its very beginning.

Again, in the opening of the Book of Revelation Jesus Christ is acclaimed as the one "who loves us and freed us from our sins by his blood, and made us to be a kingdom, priests serving his God and Father." (1.5–6). This is repeated in the great, solemn, festive and universal celebration dedicated to the Lamb, and is expressed in the words: "You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slaughtered and by your blood you ransomed for God saints from every tribe and language and people and nation; you have made them to be a kingdom and priests and they will reign on earth." (5.9–10). This unique and joyful feast finds its source in the fact that the sacrifice of Christ the Lamb is the ransoming and saving act par excellence that reconciles a lost humanity with God, draws it from death to life and brings it out of the darkness of despair into a joyful and radiant future in union with Jesus and with God.

Lastly we must recall the experience of the two principal apostles, Peter and Paul. Both experienced a serious failure. Peter three times denied that he knew Jesus at all and that he was

his disciple (Mt 26.69–75), Paul was the persecutor of the first believers in Jesus (1 Cor 15.9; Gal 1.13; Phil 3.5–6); they were both deeply aware of their fault. To both Peter (1 Cor 15.5; Lk 24.34; Jn 21.15–19) and Paul (1 Cor 9.1; 15.8) the risen Christ manifested himself; both were forgiven sinners. Both experienced the decisive and vital meaning of forgiveness of a sinner. Their later proclamation of God's forgiveness through the Lord Jesus, crucified and risen, was not theory or empty words but a witness from their own experience. Aware of the danger of perdition they received reconciliation and became the main witnesses of divine forgiveness in the person of Jesus.

c. The Church's mediation of divine forgiveness

84. The mission to 'remit sins' must be placed in the broader background of the power given to Peter (Mt 16.19) and to the other disciples with responsibilities within the Church (Mt 18.18); it is presented in the context of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, symbolized by the striking gesture of the Risen Lord breathing upon the disciples (Jn 20.22–23). Here, at the very centre of the Easter event, was born what Paul calls 'the ministry of reconciliation'. He comments: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us." (2 Cor 5.18–19). Three sacraments are explicitly at the service of the remission of sins, baptism (Acts 2,38; 22,16; Rom 61–11; Col 2,12–14), the ministry of forgiveness (Jn 20.23) and, for the sick, the anointing entrusted to the presbyters (James 5.13–19)

5. The final goal as the inspiration for moral conduct

85. The final goal is presented in the New Testament as the ultimate stage of union with God which human beings are called to attain. On God's part it constitutes a gift that implies his transcendence and is achieved through Christ. Of humans beings it requires the will to accept it and to place their moral conduct in this life within the horizon of the future fullness of life in their perfect union with God.

Traces of this can be found in the whole range of New Testament writings, but eschatological union with God together with its acceptance on the part of human beings are developed chiefly by Paul and in the Book of Revelation.

5.1. The realized kingdom, God all in all: Paul's message

86. In a synchronic reading of all the letters attributed to Paul, the apostle views the ultimate goal of human life as the result of a dynamism, put in motion by the first acceptance of the Gospel and baptism, that ends in union with Christ.

a. The gift of eternal life

From its first reception the gift of eternal life is placed by Paul in relation to Christ: "The free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord. " (Rom 6.23). The relationship to Christ is described more precisely as a link, involving both dependence and participation, with the resurrection: "...Just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in the newness of life." (Rom 6.4).

Participation in eternal life is already realized in the present. It accompanies the Christian in constant crescendo, along the development of earthly existence and reaches its fullness in its eschatological stage.

In this regard another aspect of this life which animates the Christian should be stressed, dependence on the Spirit, who implants within the believer the new life of Christ, makes it grow and leads it to its completion. How can we picture this completion? Paul offers some very important answers.

He speaks, for example, of a life in incorruptibility, in glory, in power, of a spiritual body in place of our present pre-eschatological condition (1 Cor 15.42–44). He highlights the fact that when we rise again we shall bear 'the image of the heavenly Adam' (1 Cor 15. 49).

Another Pauline text that transports us from the present to eschatological future is the conclusion of the 'way of love' in 1 Cor 13.8–13 (cf. 12.31b–14.1a). The love with which we now love 'will never end' (13.8). In our final state both faith and hope will disappear, but love, duly intensified, remains, and will colour the whole of our eschatological existence.

Divine life is most enlighteningly summed up as a participation in the resurrection of Christ in 1 Cor 15.20-28. First Paul illustrates the vital connection between Christ's resurrection and that of the Christian, which ultimately means that there is only one great resurrection, Christ's, extending and branching out in the life and in the vitality of every Christian. Then he presses forward into greater detail. There is an order in the realization of this shared resurrection, first Christ, who, already risen, is the first fruits of a harvest still maturing, followed without fail by those 'who belong to him' (1Cor 15.23).

The Christian's full participation in the resurrection will take place 'in the parousia' (1 Cor 15.23), in the moment of Christ's final return. Viewing it from his viewpoint in the present, Paul announces, in apocalyptic language, what will happen in the meanwhile: Christ's own activity in establishing his kingdom in history. This comprises the overthrow of all those disparate forces opposed to the kingdom which will have occurred in history, till the 'last enemy...death' is overcome (1 Cor 15.24). After this the Risen Christ will "hand over to God the Father" (1 Cor 15.24) the completed kingdom, made up of himself and all those who participate fully in his resurrection. The final goal of the whole of salvation history will then be reached, God 'all in all', human beings (1 Cor 15.28), already perfectly united to him, and all those present and conformed to the Risen Christ.

b. Moral consequences

87. This ultimate goal implies consequences for Christian conduct: first of all, the Christian must be aware of being, already in the present, a bearer of that life which will one day produce this blossom. Christ, through the new life he transmits, is already rising to new life in the believer. The Spirit which the believer possesses imparts life and gives that life its structure. It constitutes the "pledge of our inheritance" (Eph 1.15) which will be ours once we reach our goal. Every increase in life, every growth in love constitutes a step forward in this direction. The Christian must consequently keep this ultimate goal in view as an inspiring point of reference. Between the present state and the ultimate goal there exists an ever-increasing continuity of life.

The evolving life of Christ imposes on the Christian certain definite choices; Paul is never tired of repeating: "You must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (Rom 6.11). All growth tends towards the future kingdom which Christ hands over to the Father and of which Christ himself is part. Participation in the future kingdom however, is no empty reality but makes demands already in the present. Having listed the 'works of the flesh' in Gal 5.19–21, Paul adds: "I am warning you, as I warned you before: those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God." (5.21). It follows that, intent on the final goal, the Christian grows daily in life and in love, but must at the same time remain on guard against all those influences opposed

to the kingdom that may lurk on the way.

5.2. The goal in the Book of Revelation: partnership with Christ and with God

88. In the Book of Revelation the teaching on eschatological fulfilment, which receives particular attention, is presented in an original way. Paul's realized kingdom, 'God all in all', is described in Revelation in anthropological terms, a city that becomes a spouse. This city is the New Jerusalem, and this change has two stages.

a. Betrothed and Bride – the New Jerusalem

In the first stage this city, still a betrothed bride, crosses the nuptial threshold (Rev 21.1–8). In a context entirely renewed by the values of Christ - "a new heaven and a new earth" - Jerusalem "comes down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21.1-2).

The bride's preparation, now ended, has brought with it a gradual growth in her 'first love' (2.4), a growth that the bride has achieved both by carrying out Christ's commands that qualify her as a kingdom (2.2-3), and by imprinting "the righteous deeds of the saints" on history (19.8).

Having crossed her nuptial threshold, the bride becomes 'the woman'. We reach the second stage. The author of the Book of Revelation expresses and stresses, with all the symbolic devices at his disposal, the new situation now created (21.9–22.5). On her part, the betrothed, now wedded, is presented, heard and experienced as capable of a mutual and equal love in her relationship with Christ. Prepared by her contact with God's transcendence in heaven, whence she descends, still bearing God's touch, which is love, the new Jerusalem appears in the fullness of her relationship with Christ, pervaded as she is by his newness. On Christ's part, he himself is pledged to bestow on his bride the very best of his gifts; he floods her with light, and as giver of "a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal" (21.11), transmits to her the glory of God. He opens her to all peoples, with her twelve gates, "twelve angels and the names of the twelve tribes of Israel", founded on "the twelve apostles of the Lamb". (21.14). He gives her stability, he builds her up to the dimensions of his love (cf. 21.16; Eph 3.18–19). Above all, he places her in direct contact with God (21.18), a living and pulsating contact, symbolized by the abundance of precious stones (21.19), He floods her with "the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb." (21.1). Neither Christ the Lamb nor the Bride could exchange a greater gift.

b. The completed kingdom

89. There is, however, also another aspect. In the new Jerusalem, 'the bride of the Lamb' (21.9), 'the Kingdom of God and of his Christ' (11.15) is now fully realized. This combination of wedding and kingdom inspires the author to one of the most solemn celebrations of the whole book 19.6–8):

"Hallelujah, for the Lord our God the Almighty reigns,
Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory,
For the marriage of the Lamb has come,
And his bride has made herself ready;
To her it has been granted to be clothed
With fine linen, bright and pure."

The combination of kingdom and eschatological wedding now represents a kingdom no longer

in process of becoming but now fully complete, a kingdom already possessed in an ineffable and immediate encounter with God: “They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads...the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever.” (22.4–5). This includes the full realization in Christ of the covenant partnership. It is fulfilled by attaining to the level of nuptial parity. In this context Christ bestows on his bride a direct experience of God in a total sharing of life. The new Jerusalem needs no temple to make this possible: “Its temple is the Lord God almighty and the Lamb.” (21.22).

c. Responsible co-operation

90. As we have already seen, the author insists on the responsible co-operation of Christians that they may receive the eschatological gift. Eight times he relates the victory the Christian has to win through collaboration with Christ to the reward Christ himself will give ‘in the end’ (Cf. .Rev 2.26; cf. 2.7, 11, 17, 26, 28; 3.5, 12, 21). In the name of the Spirit those who die in the Lord are proclaimed blessed because “their deeds will follow them” (14.13). Before the impressive scene of the new Jerusalem, the author emphasizes the future judgement of all “according to their deeds” (20.13). In order to form part of the heavenly Jerusalem ‘a victory’ over personal difficulties is required – “Those who conquer will inherit these things” (21.7) – especially collaboration in the victory which the risen Christ is ever gaining in history over forces opposed to the kingdom and the covenant.

Still in explicit relation with entry into the new Jerusalem, the concluding liturgical dialogue in 22.6–22 lays stress, on one hand, on the need for the continual purification of the Christian: “Blessed are those who wash their robes” (22.14), and on the other, on the penalty of exclusion from the kingdom dealt out to the wicked (22.15).

5.3 Conclusion

91. The two visions, in Paul and in Revelation, finally coincide, presenting the Christian with a double perspective. Both insistently point from the present to the future, to the fullness of life that awaits the Christian, but they also urgently call attention to the present, as a reminder of the constant commitment required of us now if the fullness of life is to be achieved in the future.

PART TWO

BIBLICAL CRITERIA FOR MORAL REFLECTION

Introduction

92. The first part of this document had the purpose of indicating the principal anthropological and theological biblical guidelines that constitute the foundations of reflection about morality, and to point out their moral consequences.

The second part will take into consideration the modern situation. Our contemporaries, both individually and collectively, are confronted every day by delicate moral problems. These arise from the development of science as well as from the globalization of communications, constantly presented in such a way that even convinced believers have the impression that some certainties of the past no longer hold. Think of the various ways of dealing with the ethics of violence, terrorism, war, immigration, distribution of wealth, respect for natural resources, life itself, work, sexuality, research in the genetic field, the family and community life. Faced by

these complex problems, the temptation arose in these latest decades to put aside the Scriptures, either wholly or in part. What is to be done when the Bible provides no satisfying answers? How can we integrate biblical data into a moral discourse on problems that need the light of theological reflection, reason and the sciences for their solution? This is our present project.

It is certainly a delicate project, the reason being that the biblical canon is a complex collection of inspired texts, a collection of books by different authors dating back to very diverse epochs; they express a multitude of theological views, at times in a context of legislation or of prescriptive dicta; at other times they are narratives illustrating the revelation of the history of salvation; they also present concrete examples of moral conduct, whether positive or negative. Moreover, in the course of time they betray a diversified evolution and refinement of moral sensitivity and motivation.

All these factors render necessary the formation of some methodological criteria that will allow us to refer to Sacred Scripture in moral matters. At the same time we must take into account the theological contents of these writings, the complexity of their literary composition and finally their canonical dimension. In this regard we must pay particular attention to the re-reading of the Old Testament in the New, and apply to it with maximum possible rigour the categories of continuity, discontinuity, and advance that qualify the relationship between the two Testaments.

93. To clarify as much as possible difficult moral decisions from the point of view of Scripture, in our exposition we shall use two fundamental criteria: conformity with the biblical view of the human being and conformity with Jesus' example; as well as six other more specific ones: convergence, contrast, advance, social dimension, finality and discernment. In each of these cases we shall begin by enunciating the criterion and demonstrating, on the basis of biblical texts or themes, how the criterion is founded on either or both of the Testaments, followed by suggestions for the implications for our times.

The two fundamental criteria play a double essential role. First of all they form a bridge between the first part (fundamental structures) and the second (methodological guidelines), thereby securing the coherence of the argumentation as a whole. Secondly, they introduce and envelop, as it were, the six specific criteria. From the totality of Scripture at least six guidelines can permit a solid stand based on biblical revelation: 1. an openness to diverse cultures, hence a certain ethical universalism (convergence); 2. a firm stand in the face of incompatible values (contrast); 3. a refining process of the moral conscience observable in each of the two Testaments, but especially from the one to the other (advance); 4. a rectification of many tendencies to be found in contemporary cultures to relegate moral decisions exclusively to individual subjective choices (community dimension); 5. an openness to a definite future of the world and of history, capable of imprinting a profound mark on the objectives and motivations of moral behaviour (finality); 6. lastly, a careful distinction, in every case, between the relative or absolute value of biblical principles and moral precepts (discrimination).

A full examination or treatment of all problematic moral questions cannot be expected. We have chosen only a certain number of points, certainly far from exhaustive, that can illustrate the most fruitful way or ways to be followed in shedding light from the Scriptures on our moral reflections. Our purpose is to bring out the points offered by biblical revelation to help us today in the delicate process of making a balanced moral judgement.

1. Fundamental criteria

94. The two basic texts set at the head of our document, the Decalogue and the beatitudes, will serve to illustrate the two general criteria for precisely the reason that they possess a

foundational character on the literary as well as on the theological level.

1.1. First fundamental criterion, conformity with the biblical concept of human nature

95. It is suggested that, since much of what is contained in Scripture can also be found in other cultures and that believers do not have the monopoly of good deeds, biblical morality is not really original. Hence the main insights to be used in these matters should be sought in the field of reason.

1.1.1. Explanation

This argument is not valid. Indeed, according to Card. Joseph Ratzinger: "The originality of Sacred Scripture in moral discussion does not consist in the novelty of the arguments it puts forward, but rather in the purification, the discernment and the maturing of those proposed by the surrounding culture." Its specific contribution is twofold: 1. "The critical discernment of what is truly human, in that it renders us similar to God, and its purification from dehumanizing elements"; 2. "its insertion in a new context of meaning, that of the covenant". In other words, its newness "consists in the assimilation of the human contribution, transfigured in the divine light of Revelation that finds it climax in Christ, thus offering us the authentic way of life". The contribution of scripture is therefore originality, together with relevance to our own times, in which the complexity of many problems and the faltering of some of our certainties require a deeper understanding of the sources of our faith. "In point of fact, no ethics can be constructed without God. Even the Decalogue, which is undoubtedly the moral axis of Sacred Scripture and so important in inter-cultural dialogue, is not to be viewed primarily as law, but rather as gift. It is Gospel, to be fully understood in that perspective that finds its high point in Christ; it is therefore not an entity of self'-defining precepts but a dynamic open to ever greater depths of understanding. ('Il rinnovamento della teologia morale: prospettive del Vaticano II e diVeritatis splendor', in Camminare nella luce:Prospettive della teologia morale a partire da Verititis splendor, ed. L. Melina and J. Noriega, Roma, PUL, 2004, 39-40; 44-45).

In fact, the Bible offers a precious vantage-point from which to view all moral questions, even when it gives no complete and direct answers. More specifically, before forming a moral judgement, two questions must be asked in the first instance. Is a definite moral stance 1. In conformity with the theology of creation, i.e. with the vision of the full dignity of human nature, as 'God's own image' (Gen 1,26) in Christ, who is himself in an infinitely stronger sense, 'the image of the invisible God' (Col 1,15)? And 2. In conformity with covenantal theology, i.e. the vision of a humanity called, collectively and individually, to an intimate communion with God and to an effective collaboration in building up a new humanity that finds its completion in Christ?

1.1.2. Biblical data

96. How can this general criterion be applied in a more concrete fashion? The Decalogue, a kind of foundation of the first Law, will serve as an example. In the first part we have already proposed an outline of an 'axiological' reading of this foundational text (in terms of positive values). We shall now select two examples to illustrate a direction in which the Sinaitic Law opens a potentially rich moral horizon, capable of sustaining a reflection pertinent to a range of contemporary moral problems. The two examples chosen are life and the human couple.

1.1.3 Implications for Today's World

a. Life

98. A transposition of this precept into an axiological key opens it up to a broader perspective.

1. As we have already observed when speaking of Jesus' preaching, this transposition compels us to refine the concept of 'respect for life'. The value in question does not refer to the body alone, it also applies to everything that affects human dignity, social integration and spiritual growth.

2. Even with respect to the biological aspect it forbids us to claim power over life, whether ours or that of others. So the Church understands 'you shall not kill' in the Scripture as a prohibition of willingly causing the death of any human being, be it an embryo, a foetus, a handicapped person, the terminally diseased or individuals who are considered as socially or economically unproductive. The Church's serious reservations concerning genetic engineering are to be understood in the same way.

3. In the course of history and of the development of civilization, the Church too, meditating on the Scriptures, has refined her moral stance on the death penalty and on war, which is now becoming more and more absolute. Underlying this stance, which may seem radical, is the same anthropological basis, the fundamental dignity of the human person, created in the image of God.

4. With reference to the global problem of the ecology of our planet the moral horizon opened up by the value 'respect for life' may well go beyond the interests of humanity alone to the point of warranting a new reflection on the preservation of animal and plant species. The biblical narrative of the origins could well invite us to do so. Before the Fall the first couple receive four charges: to be fruitful, to multiply, to fill the earth and to subdue it, following a vegetarian regime (Gen 1.28–29). In Gen 9.1–4 Noah, a new Adam, ensures the repopulation of the earth after the deluge, but he is given only the first three assignments, which tends to limits his powers; he is authorized to eat flesh and fish, but is told to abstain from blood, the symbol of life. This ethic of respect for life is based on two themes of biblical theology, the fundamental 'goodness' of the whole of creation (Gen 1.4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31) and the extension of the covenant to include all living beings (Gen 9.12–16).

What is it in biblical thought that explains, in the last resort, such respect for life? None other than its divine origin. The gift of life to humanity is described symbolically as the act of 'breathing' on God's part (Gen 2.7). Moreover, this 'immortal spirit is in all things', it 'has filled the world' (Wis 12.1; 1.7).

b. The couple

99. The negative manner in which the duties of the couple are expressed (avoid, abstain from, do not...) does not exhaust their ethical message. The moral horizon opened by the commandment is expressed, among other things, in terms of personal, mutual responsibility and of solidarity: for example, it is the task of both partners to take seriously the duty of constantly renewing his and her initial pledge. Both must take into account the other's psychology, rhythm, tastes and spiritual progress (1 Pt 3.1–2.7); both must cultivate mutual respect and selfless love (Eph 5.21–22,. 28, 33); they must resolve conflicts or divergent points of view and develop harmonious relationships. Moreover the couple as such must take responsible decisions in matters of family planning, contribution to society and spiritual advance. The ritual celebration of Christian marriage implies essentially a dynamic task, not fulfilled once for all, to become ever more fully a sacramental couple that witnesses and symbolizes, in the heart of a world of relationships that are so often ephemeral and superficial, the stability, permanence, and fruitfulness of God's loving pledge towards humanity and of Christ's towards the Church.

It is therefore understandable that the Church, because of her commitment to remain unyieldingly faithful to the Word, has always extolled the greatness of the male-female couple, both in its radical dignity as 'God's image' (creation) and in the bond of mutual pledge before God and with God (covenant). In constantly and untiringly recalling the importance and sanctity of marriage, the Church does not limit herself to denouncing moral laxity, but defends the full significance of the reality of marriage in God's purpose.

1.2. Second fundamental criterion, conformity with the example of Jesus

1.2.1. Explanation

100. The other fundamental criterion focuses even more sharply on the heart of Christian morality, the imitation of Jesus, the incomparable model of conformity between word and deed, and of conformity with the will of God. There is no need to repeat or sum up what has already been said in the first part about the imitation and the following of Christ, both important themes for our purpose As Jesus is for Christians the model par excellence of perfect conduct, the principal question for moral discernment is whether Jesus' conduct is to be considered as a norm, a more or less unattainable ideal, a source of inspiration or as a simple point of reference?

1.2.2. Biblical data

101. Here too we ground our argument on a basic text, which orientates and anticipates the proclamation of the new Law in the first Gospel.

a. The Beatitudes (Mt 5.1–12)

From the very beginning the beatitudes place morality in a radical context. They affirm paradoxically the fundamental dignity of the human being in the person of the most disadvantaged, whom God defends in a preferential manner: the poor, the afflicted, the meek, the hungry, the persecuted. They are 'sons of God' (v. 9), heirs of the kingdom of God (vv. 3, 10). Jesus himself typifies, in a most radical way, the 'poor' (Mt 8.19; cf. 2 Cor 8.9; Phil 2.6–8), the 'meek and humble' (Mt 11.29) and 'persecuted for righteousness' sake'.

b. The remainder of the Sermon

The beatitudes cannot be cannot read in isolation from the discourse they introduce. This presents a basic perspective on moral life and a kind of parallel to the Decalogue, despite their differences in form and intention. Within the composition of the first Gospel this is the first, longest and programmatic discourse of Jesus, which plunges us immediately into the heart of what it means to be a faithful son of God in this world. The idea of 'a more abundant righteousness' (the phrase perisseuein pleion), provides the underlying theme of this composition. (Mt 5.20; cf. 3.15; 5.6, 10; 6.1, 33; 23.23).

Of this more abundant righteousness Jesus is not only the revealer but also the model. The basic principle is enunciated in 5.17–20. The first pronouncement contains the programme of the whole gospel: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil". The person, the way of life and the teaching of Jesus represent the fullest revelation of what God requires through the law and the prophets, and herald the imminent presence of the kingdom of God. The Sermon reaches its peak in the pronouncement "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect." (5,48). In this way the idea that human beings were created 'in God's image and likeness' is transposed into a specifically moral key. God himself is the model of all human conduct (teleios, 'perfect', in the sense of 'complete',

‘accomplished’), hence the exhortation “Strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness” (6.33) and strive to “do the will of my Father who is in heaven” (7.21). Of this moral perfection Christ is the perfect model (cf. Mt 19.16–22).

1.2.3. Implications for Today’s World

102. How far is the radical stance which Jesus incarnates in his life and in his death normative?

1. The beatitudes cannot, of course, be used as a pretext to extol human misery, and much less to encourage a passive resignation to persecution that finds its only solution in the hope of the afterlife. On the one hand it is true that, following Jesus, the Church brings a word of comfort and encouragement to those who suffer. The Semitic substratum of the word ‘blessed’, contains the concept of ‘walking straight’ (root ‘šr in Hebrew), which suggests that the poor and the persecuted are already on the path to the kingdom. On the other hand, the text of the beatitudes itself is not devoid of moral overtones, for it takes up the religious and moral sense of ‘seeking poverty’, given to the concept by the prophet Zephaniah (Zeph 2.3).

2. The exhortation to practise a higher righteousness than that of the scribes and Pharisees (cf. Mt 5.20) implies that in the Christian order every moral norm is now situated within the dynamic context of a filial relationship. In the Sermon Jesus insists often on this relationship and at least sixteen times he speaks about God, calling him ‘Father’ of those around him, and only at the end does he call him, for the first time, “my Father in heaven” (Mt 7.21). He also takes up the three traditional expressions of Jewish piety, almsgiving, prayer and fasting (6.1–18). In each case the disciple’s efforts should issue in an intimate union with God, putting aside any calculation, any quest for profit or human praise. The rest of the Sermon focuses attention on the bond of love and trust between God and the disciple. From this derives the responsibility on the disciple to live the gospel. Otherwise an obstacle is created to the fundamental quality of life willed by God, with the risk of disastrous consequences. The texts concerning judgement are themselves warnings about the destructive effects of evil conduct. More particularly the reader is presented, by means of a series of metaphors, with a choice between two alternatives: the wide or the narrow gate, the broad or narrow path, true or false prophets, good or bad tree, wise or foolish house-builders (7,13 – 27).

3. In what way can the Christian reader take upon himself the specific, apparently radical, moral teaching of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with the beatitudes? In the course of the history of Christianity two essential questions have been raised in this regard: first of all, to whom is the discourse addressed, to all Christians or only to the chosen few? Further, how are these injunctions to be interpreted?

Disciples who strive to imitate Jesus are told to adopt a way of life that reflects now the future reality of the kingdom; they must show compassion, not respond to violence, avoid sexual exploitation, take the initiative in reconciliation and love their enemies. Such dispositions and actions reflect God’s ‘righteousness’ itself, and characterize the new life in the kingdom of God. Of these, reconciliation, pardon and unconditional love are central and lend an orientation to the whole ethic of the discourse (cf. Mt 22.34–40).

Jesus’ instructions and his own example therefore, are not to be seen as inaccessible ideals, but rather they reflect the characteristics of the sons and daughters of God in the fullness of the kingdom. The orientations given by Jesus have the value of true moral imperatives. They provide a basic outlook to lead the disciple to seek and find similar ways of regulating actions and values towards the final vision of the gospel, to lead a better life in the world, in anticipation of the coming kingdom. Jesus’ moral sayings and his example establish the theological and

Christological foundations of moral living and encourage the disciple to live by the values of the kingdom of God revealed by Jesus.

1.3. The fundamental criteria: conclusion

103. Whenever a judgement is required on the Christian morality of any action the immediate questions to be asked are how far this practice is compatible with the biblical vision of the human being, and to what extent it is inspired by the example of Jesus.

2. Specific criteria

104. After these first steps, the application of specific criteria, on the basis of biblical texts must now complete the contours of a methodology for the discussion of moral problems.

The systematic treatment of these criteria hinges on the following observations: 1. Convergence: the Bible shows an openness to natural morality in its formulation of many moral laws and orientations. 2. Contrast: the Bible takes a very firm stand when combating countervalues. 3: Advance: the Bible demonstrates a refinement of conscience on certain points of morality, especially within the Old Testament, and later on the ground of Jesus' teaching and the impact of the Easter events. 4: The community dimension: the Bible lays great stress on the community dimension of morality. 5. Finality: by founding the hope of the afterlife on the expectation of the kingdom (Old Testament) and on the paschal mystery (New Testament) the Bible provides human beings with an indispensable motivation in the search for moral perfection. 6 Discernment: lastly, the Bible enunciates principles and offers examples of morality of differing importance, whence the necessity of a critical evaluation.

The two basic texts which we have already used illustrate the six methodological criteria that we intend to develop. 1. Convergence: some precepts have their own equivalent in other contemporary cultures. The 'golden rule' in Mt 7.12, for example, finds a similar formulation, in a negative or a positive form, in other civilizations. 2. Contrast: some pagan customs, for example idolatry (Ex 20.4) and verbose prayers (Mt 6.7) are censured. 3. Advance: The whole of Jesus' discourse illustrates a higher righteousness, thus fulfilling the intention and the spirit of the Torah (cf. 5.17) by means of a deeper interiority, a harmony of thought and action and a more demanding moral code. 4: Community dimension: Jesus builds on the community values of Decalogue morality; but the precepts concerning personal morality lead to building up the community. Suffering itself, endured 'for the sake of' Jesus' brings the community together (Mt 5.11-12). 5. Finality: to the earthly eschatology of the Decalogue (the promise: "that your days may be long" in Ex 20.12) Jesus adds hope in the afterlife as the basic motivation of human conduct (Mt 5.3–10; 6.19–21). 6: Discernment: the arguments in favour of Sabbath observance, in one case couched in cultural terms (Ex 20.2–11) and in another in terms of social history (Deut 5.12 – 15), open the way to a richer and more refined moral reflection on dominical rest and on time itself. From another point of view the abolition of the custom of divorce (Mt 5.31–32), authorized by the Torah, is a good demonstration of the distinction to be drawn between permanent laws and those justified by particular cultural, temporal or local circumstances.

We attempt to provide a keyword to each one of these criteria. 1. Convergence: wisdom, as a human virtue, potentially discoverable in all cultures. 2. Contrast: faith. 3. Advance: justice, not so much in its classical theological sense as in its rich and dynamic biblical connotation (Hebrew tsedaqâh, Greek dikaiosynê), implying the search for God's will and progress in the way of perfection (teleiôsis). 4. Community dimension: fraternal love (agapē). 5. Finality: hope. 6. Discernment: prudence, implying the need to justify moral judgements, both objectively, beginning with exegesis and Church tradition, and subjectively, on the basis of a conscience

guided by the Holy Spirit (syneidêsis).

2.1. First specific criterion: convergence

105. On many points the Bible shows a convergence between its morality and the laws and moral orientations of surrounding peoples. The same fundamental moral questions were raised by the biblical tradition as were discussed by philosophers and moralists who had no access to divine revelation and the solutions it offered. There is often a convergence in the answers given within and outside the biblical tradition. We can speak here of a natural wisdom, a potentially universal value. This may encourage the Church in our days to enter into dialogue with modern culture and with the moral systems of other religions or philosophical doctrines in a common search for norms of conduct regarding moral problems.

2.1.1. Biblical data

106. Both the Old and the New Testament contain texts that demonstrate this convergence on various aspects of morality. These are: the origin of sin and of evil, certain norms of human conduct, sapiential considerations, moral exhortations and lists of virtues.

a. The origin of sin and evil

The basic biblical outlook on human dignity and the human inclination to sin is presented in the first chapters of Genesis. Many moral presuppositions of the Ancient Near Eastern are held in common, especially those of the Mesopotamian epic poem ‘Enuma Elish’. The impact exercised by this poem is to be seen in the number of surviving ancient witnesses to it. The shared beliefs include the creation of the universe by a personal divinity, the special position in it held by human beings, and their privileged relationship with the divinity. In both literatures the human situation is characterized by human inability to act in accordance with accepted ideals, and its consequence - death.

The myths in classical Greek drama are deeply expressive of human failings, and the tragedy leaves little room for hope and forgiveness. The great classical tragedies describe the inevitable and lasting consequences of these faults and the implacable divine vengeance. The same convictions are also attested by Greek funerary inscriptions, in which the sense of helplessness and the absurdity of life are dominant. On this is founded their pessimistic evaluation of the human situation.

The analysis of human nature and its condition in the opening chapters of the Bible assign a different meaning to human existence. Hope is a relevant factor in the biblical concept of fallible human nature, for the God of biblical revelation is a God who loves, pardons and cares for the created world, and of whom every human being is the image and the representative. Without disguising or excusing the human inclination to sin, these chapters give a positive sense to morality through their certainty of divine intervention and forgiveness.

Though the biblical concept of the world is expressed in a language indebted to Mesopotamian culture there are particularly two elements that are lacking in these myths. These are the divine care for humanity, and human responsibility for the continuation of creation, a responsibility expressed in the task assigned to Adam, created in God’s image. In the Mesopotamian worldview human beings have merely the task of serving the gods by providing them with sacrifices.

b. The Laws

107. The laws of the Old Testament (e.g. Ex 20–23; Deut 12–26) also belong to the great legislative tradition of the Ancient East (e.g. the Code of Hammurabi). Particularly impressive is the similarity between individual legal prescriptions. The conviction that law and justice, especially the protection of the weak, are the foundation of the life of any society is the basis of the high regard for law in Near Eastern culture.

The Old Testament does not address judges or kings who have the duty to maintain justice and put it into practice. It addresses every member of God's people, who must acknowledge that the common good, exercised in the spirit of fellowship, is at the heart of life in a community. We find nothing in the Bible that corresponds to a 'Declaration of human rights', because the duties expressed in such a declaration are presented not as passive rights but as active duties. What is primary is not so much the right of a person to a certain treatment but rather the duty of every individual to treat others in a way that respects the human dignity given them by God, and the infinite value to which every human person is entitled in God's eyes. Biblical laws are often not pure legal rules but warnings and instructions that demand far more than any individual law could ever do (e.g. Ex 23.4–5; Deut 21.15–17). The Old Testament laws stand midway between justice and morality, and are intended to develop in the human person a conscience in relation to God that constitutes the basis of community life. Pre-eminent and specific is the emphasis on the conviction that the dignity and the independence of the individual before God must not be diminished by any human slavery (Ex 22.20–22; 23.11-12). Equally important, and perhaps even more so than in the lawcodes of the Ancient Near East, is the concern for the poor and the weak. Both the Law and the message of the prophets insist on protecting the interests of these groups; the vulnerable member of the people must be treated not only with justice but also with the same generosity shown by God towards Israel in Egypt.

c. Wisdom

108. In the Hellenistic period biblical moral teaching is prepared to learn from the surrounding world, especially from proverbial instruction and from the wisdom movement developed particularly in Egypt. Some biblical collections of proverbs show a close relationship with the wisdom of Amenemope and Ptah-Hotep, especially on matters dealing with the protection of the weak and the vulnerable (Cf. Prov 22.17–24). Nevertheless, though the conclusions may have been drawn from human reason, Israel is eminently conscious that the source of all wisdom is God (Job 28; Sir 24). Ben Sirach especially, integrates the Torah with human wisdom, because the scribe "will show the wisdom of what he has learned, and will glory in the law of the Lord's covenant." (Sir 39.8). Israel too is not exempt from the doubts and the questioning of conventional solutions to such problems, characteristic of the Hellenistic era, such as the prosperity of the wicked and the meaning of death (Job; Eccl 3.18–22).

d. Paul and the philosophers of his environment

109. The value of the natural law, or rather the capacity of the human conscience to distinguish between what should and should not be done, is acknowledged and appreciated in Rom 2.14–15. It is therefore not surprising that the Pauline corpus, notwithstanding its negative judgement on pagan mores (e.g. Eph 4.17–32), integrates into its teaching some 'topoi' (recurring themes) common among contemporary philosophers and teachers of morality. The best known of these 'topoi', originally taken from Euripedes' Medea, occurs in Rom 7.16-24. It has its parallels in Ovid (Metamorphoses 7,20 – 21) and (slightly later than Paul) in Epictectus' Dissertations (2.17–19) regarding the enslavement of human beings to their habits and passions, and their lack of true freedom.

Further, a certain number of Paul's principles and exhortations resemble the negative and

positive counsels of contemporary philosophical schools in the Greek world. Literal affinities indicate literary borrowing, very clear in Gal 6.1–10; the same thing can be said about other Pauline passages (e.g. 1 Cor 5.1). Although we cannot call Paul a plagiarist or a follower of a philosophical school, many of his stances and exhortations are close to those of the Stoics. Like the philosophers of his time, especially the Stoics, Paul teaches that freedom from passions is a pre-requisite of moral conduct. The theme of the struggle with passions was not a discovery of Paul or of the New Testament; it was a 'topos' of contemporary moral teaching. Similarly the discourse on the Areopagus in Acts 17.22–31 presents Paul as making free use of Stoic ideas or in any case of popular Greek philosophy, quoting the Cilician poet Aratus to show God's closeness to human beings. This is true also of the Pauline letters which contain lists of virtues recognized and praised by the contemporary world, lists which find their equivalents among those of contemporary moral teachers, and include simplicity, moderation, justice, patience, perseverance, respect and honesty.

Paul's originality consists in affirming that only the Spirit can come to the help of our weakness (Rom 8.3–4.26). Although for Paul there exist certain firm points of morality which are necessary for those who want to enter into the kingdom of God (cf. Rom 1.18–32; 1 Cor 5.11; 6.9–10; Gal 5.19–21), the apostle's mind is that no external code is necessary for any who enjoy the fruits of the Spirit, radically opposed to the works of the flesh (Gal 5.16–18). The Christian, whose life is hidden with Christ (Col 3.3; cf. Phil 2.5) is guided by the Spirit: "If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit." (Gal 5.25; Rom 8.14). The guidance provided by Paul himself is also perceived as coming from the Spirit: "I think that I too have the Spirit of God". (1 Cor 7.40; cf. 7.25).

2.1.2. Applications to today's world

110. Today's situation is characterized by ever greater progress in the natural sciences and by the increase of the power and of the possibilities of human action. The human sciences are continually developing further the knowledge of individuals and of human societies. The means of communication favour globalization, and an ever greater interdependence between every part of the earth. This situation brings with it great problems, but it also opens great possibilities for living together and for the survival of humanity. In modern society there are so many ideas, sensitivities, desires, proposals, movements and pressure-groups involved in the search of solutions for these problems and of the equitable handling of modern resources. Christians live together with their contemporaries in this situation and join others in their responsibility for finding adequate solutions. The Church finds herself in continual dialogue with the complexities of modern culture and participates in the search for just norms to handle this shared situation. We enumerate some typical areas.

1. A growing sensitivity concerning human rights led first to the abolition of slavery, then to a lively awareness of the equality of all human races and the urge to eliminate any form of discrimination.

2. Preoccupation with the development and proliferation of weapons and instruments of mass destruction has given an impetus towards a reformulation of the morality of conflicts and wars and requires a serious commitment for peace.

3. Concern for the equal dignity of the sexes requires a thorough re-examination of the conditions in which their respective roles are played out because of the divergent concepts in different cultures, even today.

4. Human technical potential resulting from scientific discoveries has rendered possible a use

and abuse of natural resources, previously unthinkable. The great divergence in the economic, scientific, technical, political and military power of different peoples has led to massive inequality in the distribution and use of natural resources, and to a growing concern with the consequent problems of ecology and justice. The need is felt for a maximum impetus to preserve nature, a patrimony common to all humanity, and for its equitable distribution among all peoples.

The Bible has no immediate and ready answers to these problems, but its message on God the Creator of all, on human responsibility for creation, on the dignity of every human person, on solicitude for the poor, etc., prepares Christians for an active and fruitful participation in the common search for an adequate solution to these current problems.

2.2. Second specific criterion: contrast

111. The Bible is unambiguously opposed to certain norms and customs followed by societies, groups or individuals. This refusal is determined in the Old Testament by faith in the LORD, by faithfulness to the covenant through which the LORD united to himself the people of Israel in a unique fashion, and, in the New Testament, by faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God, in whose incarnation God has united the whole of humanity to himself once and for all.

2.2.1. Biblical data

112. The Decalogue, whose principal accent is on what should not be done, is opposed to a whole series of actions. After God's self-presentation he commands: "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself an idol...You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God." (Ex 20.3–5).

In the course of the Bible many terms are used to condemn this sinful practice. In the teaching of the prophets certain concrete realities are listed as sins, for example, violence, robbery, injustice, exploitation, fraud, false accusations, etc. (cf. Amos 2.6–8; Hos 4.2; Micah 2.1–2; Jer 6.13: Ezek 18.6–8). In the Pauline literature specific sins are singled out: cheating, greed, jealousy, quarrels, drunkenness, immorality, envy, etc. (cf. Rom 1.29-31; 1 Cor 5.10; 2 Cor 12.20; Gal 5. 19–21). Sin is viewed essentially as a violation of personal relationships that place the person against God, but it is also seen as the violation of the dignity and the rights of other persons. The centre theme however, is the struggle against infidelity to the LORD God of Israel and against the false concepts of God expressed in idolatry by the service of other gods. This conflict appears in the Law, it is central for the activity of the prophets and is present also in postexilic times. Jesus'

main task is to reveal the true face of God (John 1.18). The strife against apostasy from God and against a preference given to other supreme values is also present in Paul and in the Book of Revelation.

a. The struggle of the prophets against idolatry

113. In the land of Canaan the people of Israel was confronted by the cult of foreign gods. Canaanite religion was cosmological, centred on the relationship between the divine order of the universe and the human response. The Canaanites venerated gods which were little more than personifications of natural forces, whose service was tied up with a sophisticated mythology whose rites were intended to guarantee the fertility of the land, of animals and of human beings. These fertility rites were especially condemned by the Law and the prophets. The God of Israel, on the contrary, was not an intra-cosmic divinity but above and beyond all natural forces. For some time henotheism was able to co-exist with the existence of other gods, but during the exile

it became evident that the pagan gods were non-existent, hence the LORD was considered to be the only true God (monotheism).

It seems that idolatry was especially rampant among the Israelites during the reign of Ahab (1 Kings 16.29–34). Elijah is presented as the restorer of the Mosaic faith, for the cult of Baal had pervaded the northern kingdom. In a dramatic scene on Mount Carmel Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal, reprehends the ambiguous behaviour of the people and demands an exclusive loyalty to the LORD.

Hosea too, is aware of the fact that the radical cause of social and political unrest is the infiltration of Canaanite religious practices into Israelite worship. The Israelites had introduced into their own cult elements of the fertility rites of Baal (Hos 4.7–14; 10.1–2; 13.1-3). Cultic corruption coincided with plots and betrayals in the royal palace and among the people at large (Hos 7.1–7; 8.4–7), and with the collapse of moral standards (Hos 4.1–3). The prophet calls idolatry 'prostitution' (Hos 1– 2; 5.4).

The canonical prophets developed a common opinion in this regard. The cult of home-made divinities, that is, gods that are at the service only of the interests of their devotees, goes hand in hand with both public and private moral degeneracy (Amos 2.4–8; Is 1.21-31; Jer 7.1–15; Ezek 22.1–4). The social teaching of the Church can be considered to be in line with this teaching as she has always maintained that those socio-economic systems that claim absolute authority for themselves and subordinate the transcendent value of human beings, created in God's image, to group ideologies can lead only to the collapse of civilization.

The exile must be regarded as constituting a turning-point in Israel's attitude towards idolatry. The exiles, confronted with the polytheistic cult of their masters, understand that the LORD alone is the Creator, and the lord of all (Is 40.12–18, 21–26).

b. Opposition to enforced pagan worship

114. In the time of the Maccabees a confrontation between the traditional Jewish religion and Hellenism occurred when Antiochus IV followed a more aggressive policy than that of his predecessors in the diffusion of Hellenistic culture (167–164 BCE). The survival of Judaism itself and its faith in the LORD were at stake. This provoked a double reaction, an armed revolution (1 and 2 Macc) and a passive resistance. The Book of Daniel was written in favour of the latter to encourage perseverance under persecution.

The Book of Wisdom is a response to the mentality prevalent in the Hellenistic world immediately before the Christian era. It was composed to provide Jews in the Diaspora with a defence against the seductive influence of Hellenistic philosophy and religions and also against the new cults then proliferating in Alexandria. The fault of those who adore nature lies in their failure to recognize God, the Creator, in the beauty of the works of creation. While searching for God they fail to take the final step (13.1-9). The consequences of idolatry are the mystery cults that carry with themselves their own punishment (14.22–15.16). This proves the absurdity of the veneration of idols, which is in total contrast to the appeal of the miracles worked by the true God in favour of his people.

c. Paul's opposition to pagan worship

115. Christianity had its origins in a Judaism thoroughly purified of idolatry. In the course of its expansion it had to confront the paganism of the Roman Empire, in which there was a great variety of religious cults, and also worship of the emperor. Paul came face to face with idolatry

in Ephesus (Acts 19.24–41), and he speaks about it and its consequences in Rom 1.18–32. Basing himself on the critique of Hellenistic Judaism (Wis 13–15) he presents a traditional polemic against the pagan world before introducing his Jewish interlocutor (Rom 2.1–3.20), to show that no one, gentile or Jew, is righteous before God without faith in Jesus Christ (3.21–26).

God's self-revelation through creation should lead the people to the proper response of adoration and thanksgiving. A deliberate refusal to do this renders their thoughts vain and their hearts darkened, it also leads to a false vaunting of wisdom and to the corruption of true worship by means of the making and veneration of images of created things. There is a connection between the practice of idolatry and sexual depravity that dishonours the body, the means of interactivity, and communication among persons. Such conduct annuls the distinction between the roles of the sexes, contrary to the Creator's design. The punishment incurred is the uncontrollable desire to persevere in this depraved course of action.

The list of vices drawn up by Paul includes broader social relationships and points to the corruption on the individual (Rom 1.24), interpersonal (1.26–27) and wider social level, a corruption that pervades and poisons all human life. Perseverance in sin and approval of it in others demonstrates how, for many people, such conduct, that leads to separation from God, has become 'normal' and acceptable.

d. The opposition the Book of Revelation to the demoniac system opposed to God

116. The Book of Revelation presents two great systems at work in the world: the kingdom of God with Jesus as its centre together with his followers, and the anti-kingdom of Satan, a system widespread over the whole Roman Empire. Christians therefore live out their allegiance to Jesus within an earthly, demoniac, all-pervading system opposed to God. This finds its concrete realization in the city of Rome, with its emperor-cult spread all over the vast empire. As the emperor is a representative of the gods and demands to be adored, he makes use of the state system to spread his demonic propaganda in the whole empire, in contrast with God. This is expressed symbolically by the "beast that rises out of the sea" (13.1), in "the beast that rose from the land" (13.11) and in "the kings of the earth" (17.2, 18; 18.3, 9). Their activity is concentrated and symbolized in the city of Babylon (17.1–7).

In Revelation 17–18 the author describes the riches and the luxury of Babylon (Rome), doomed to destruction. The city is the symbol of a godless way of life (17.3–6) in total contrast with the values of the kingdom. The result is that Christians will pay with their own lives for their witness (17.6). The city is characterized by its self-sufficiency (18.7), it stands for a consumerist society depending on commerce and full of every kind of luxury, at the price of widespread slavery (18,11 – 13. 22 – 23). It reacts aggressively against Jesus and all those who belong to him (17.14). However, despite its fame, this city is condemned by God and will collapse in a moment. Its destruction is represented as a liturgical drama (18.9–24) by means of the lament of kings, merchants and mariners, which accentuates its dramatic ruin. Christians are invited to "go out of it" (18.4) so as not to take part in its crimes and in their punishment; they are urged to keep away from the surrounding wicked world, but need 'wisdom' to inspire them with a positive outlook (cf. 17.7, 9). They will rejoice when they behold God's revenge on their enemies and will wonder in awe at the desolation of the ruined city (18.20–23).

2.2.2. Implications for today's world

117. Mistaken attitudes today which require a clear and decisive stand present themselves not as idolatry in the sense of veneration of images and statues, but as self-idolatry, be it of individuals, social classes or states. Freedom of individuals or the all-embracing power of the state are

elevated to the status of supreme values. Concentration on such values is given the name of secularism, capitalism, materialism, consumerism, individualism, hedonism, etc. Common to all these –isms is the fact that they regard human life as an enclosed system, shut within the present world. By ruling out any transcendent values they put God aside through denial or disregard, not acknowledging him as the origin and the end of all that exists. The implications of this disregard or denial of God must be made explicit.

a. Deficiencies of this modern outlook

Western democratic societies possess many positive features in the cultural, economic and political field, but they also suffer from grave deficiencies. On the plea of the right to total liberty, people claim the right to commit abortion, euthanasia, to genetic experimentation, homosexual unions and to behave as independent authors of their own being. Consumerist greed can often be satisfied only through the exploitation of other people and of weaker nations. The stifling pursuit of profit sustained by today's technology is the cause of abuse of natural resources and oppression, indirectly at least, of others. While the Western world goes on enjoying such a high level of life, prosperity is sustained at the expense of the poverty of the major part of the population of the world.

b. Totalitarian tendencies

118. In the past theologies of Church–state relations were based almost exclusively on Rom 13.1–7 (cf. 1 Tim 2.1–2; Tit 3.1; 1 Pet 2.13–17); even autocratic governments relied on that text in their demand for obedience. In fact Paul makes nothing more than a general assertion about legitimate authority, basing his thought on the fact that God wants order in society rather than anarchy and chaos. Christians too depend on the protection of the state and on a broad series of services, they share with it many values, and cannot withdraw from their civic responsibilities and from taking part in social life.

However, after a century in which totalitarian regimes devastated whole continents and slaughtered millions of people, this conception of relationship with the state must be completed by the way Revelation describes the diabolical influence of a state that replaces God and claims all power for itself. Such a state is based on values and positions which contrast with the gospel. It oppresses its subjects and demands total conformity, it executes or exiles those who oppose it. Christians are called to use 'wisdom' in discerning the signs of the times to criticise and unmask the real state of things in such a state, which becomes a servant of diabolical powers, and also to denounce a luxurious lifestyle, sustained at the expense of others. They are called to view politics, economics and commerce in the light of the gospel and to examine in this light proposals for the functioning of society. Because Christians cannot withdraw from the times in which they live, they have to acquire an identity that will enable them to live out their faith with persevering patience and prophetic witness. They are also invited to develop ways of resistance to enable them to offer opposition and to preach the gospel, thus countering through civil institutions the diabolical powers, which have an impact on the modern world (cf. Eph 6.10–20).

c. The illusion of self-sufficiency

119. At the base of all ideologies is the human will with its aspiration to gain unlimited power. This attitude has its roots in the refusal to acknowledge the condition of a creature dependent on God. In revolt against God it seeks to bring about an illusionary transformation of human existence. We are dealing here not with economic, political or scientific aspirations but with the desire to dispose of ourselves and our destiny with total liberty, to create an earthly paradise that will finally usher in an era of universal happiness. This aura of eschatological expectation

explains the illusion that humans beings are able, unaided, to establish a moral and political order in a secular community from which God is excluded or, at least, disregarded. Although such an ideology continues to exercise an intellectual fascination and to exercise political influence, it is evident that the future is unable to promise unlimited technological, industrial and social progress.

2.3. Third specific criterion: advance

120. The Bible witnesses to a refinement of conscience on certain moral questions. This advance took place in Israel thanks to a lengthy reflection on the exile experience, and in some traditions, on the experience in the Diaspora. It reaches its perfection under the influence of the teaching of Jesus and in his paschal mystery. After the return of Jesus to the Father the Holy Spirit accompanies the disciples in their search to live out his teachings in new circumstances (John 14.25–26), The criterion of advance is an invitation to believers, in trying to understand moral problems more profoundly, to seek conformity with the 'higher justice' of the kingdom, on the lines marked out by Jesus himself (Matt 5.20).

2.3.1. Biblical data

121. As in the case of revelation biblical morality too progresses in a gradual and historical way; again, as happens in the knowledge of God in general, so also the discernment of God's will takes place progressively. Jesus offers concrete examples of this in the so called antitheses in the Sermon on the Mount. We shall examine those that deal with conflict with our neighbour (Matt 5.38–42) and matrimonial morality (Matt 5.31–32). Another example is to be found in the various forms of divine worship, whose main purpose is the maintenance of saving communion with God (cf. John 4.19–26).

a. The development of biblical morality

Biblical revelation takes place in the context of history. This applies also to morality as revealed in the Bible. God reveals himself and teaches humanity to walk in his ways. He chooses Abraham and sends him on his way; he then chooses Moses and sets him the task of establishing a nation from Abraham's descendants; he later selects and sends a series of prophets, and lastly he sends "his own Son" (Matt 21.37; Mark 12.6). Each of these messengers transmits God's call in a definite phase of the history of salvation, gathering a people for God and imparting a teaching on God and on the ways of worthily living out God's call (cf. Eph 4.1; Phil 1.27; 1 Thess 2.12).

The revelation of this morality takes place in gradual development and in dialogue between God and his people. For this reason the moral teaching of the Bible cannot be reduced to a set of principles or to codes of casuistical laws. Biblical texts cannot be treated as pages of a moral system, they should rather be viewed dynamically in the growing light of revelation. God enters the world and reveals himself increasingly, he addresses himself to people and provokes them to comprehend his will more deeply, making it possible for them to follow him ever more closely. This light reaches its peak in the coming of Christ, who confirmed the teaching of Moses and the prophets (Matt 22.34–40) and instructed his people and humanity at large by his own authority (Matt 28,.9–20).

In the light of the fullness of revelation brought by Christ Christians can understand the fruitful nature of the preceding revelation. Whatever was hidden in the old dispensation now becomes evident in the final stage of revelation, when the light of the risen Christ throws light on the intentions of God's earlier revelation. In this way we can decipher the moral message of the Old

Testament definitively in the full context of the New Testament. This process is guided and helped by the Holy Spirit, who leads the disciples of Jesus into the entire truth (John 16.13).

Beginning with Abraham, who has to leave his homeland (Gen 12.1) and with the people who have to leave Egypt to cross the desert, and so on throughout the history of the people of Israel and of humanity, God's gradual revelation of his will transforms itself into a 'journey' for humanity. The meaning of the word 'walk' transcends that of a merely physical movement and becomes a symbol of a life of constant conversion that accepts God's call with docility; people apprehend the will of God and gradually conform their activity in imitation of God into an activity of faithfulness, justice, mercy and love (cf. Gen 18.19; Deut 6.1–2; Jos 22.5; Jer 7.21–23). In the New Testament this image is taken up by Jesus who calls all to follow him (cf. Mark 1.17; 8.34). He says of himself: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14.6). All are invited to conversion and to become imitators of God (cf. Matt 5.48; Eph 5.1) by imitating both Christ (1 Thess 1.6; 1 Pet 2.21) and his apostles (1 Cor 4.16; 11.1; Phil 3.17; 2 Thess 3.7–9).

b. Conflict with neighbours

122. In Matt 5.38–42 Jesus says: "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But I say to you. Do not resist an evildoer. But if anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also....". There is an advance from excessive vengeance to equality of retaliation until finally the chain of retribution is overcome. In Gen 4.23–24 Lamech, a descendant of Cain, is presented as a man who vaunts an unbridled vengeance in his song: "I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.". The covenant code replaces this with the law of retaliation: "If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe." (Ex 2123–24). This law is also to be found in the lawcodes of other ancient oriental peoples with the purpose of preventing disproportionate vengeance. Already in many psalms Israel proclaims through the voice of the injured party that vengeance belongs only to God: "O LORD, you God of vengeance, you God of vengeance, shine forth!" (Ps 94,1). The wisdom books too reverse the law of retaliation: "If your enemies are hungry, give them bread to eat; and if they are thirsty, give them water to drink: for you will heap coals of fire on their heads, and the LORD will reward you." (Prov 25.21–22).

Jesus refers explicitly to Gen 4.23–24 to reverse completely the cycle of vengeance: "Then Peter came and said to him, 'Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often should I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus said to him, 'Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times." (Matt 18.21–22). He establishes forgiveness and love as the criteria for belonging to the Father: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven." (Matt 5.44–45; cf. 18.21). Taking up this concept, Paul warns: "See that none of you repays evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to all." (1 Thess 515), and: "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12.21).

The law of retaliation is often understood as an expression of vengeance and of violent revenge, whereas it was originally laid down to limit violence and counter-violence. Its purpose was to overcome the instinctive and uncontrolled craving for vengeance and revenge. This tendency is now changed to accord with the nature of God, who is "merciful and gracious" (Ex 34.6), who pardons faults. If we take the five books of the Torah as one great composition, we find at its centre, in Lev 16, the rite of the day of atonement whose main theme is 'God who pardons'. In this context, to this characteristic of God corresponds the well-known requirement: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lev 19.18), which is the Old Testament expression of the

golden rule, given in Matt 7.12. The New Testament continues in the same direction the development already present in the Old.

c. The morals of matrimony

123. In Matt 5.31–32 Jesus says: "It was also said, 'Whoever divorces his wife let him give her a certificate of divorce'. But I say to you that anyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of unchastity, causes her to commit adultery; and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.'" Jesus excludes divorce, saying: "What God has joined together, let no one separate." (Matt 19.6). In answer to the Jews' objection he explains the rule about divorce (Deut 24.1–4) as a concession by Moses that does not obliterate the original will of God the Creator: "It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives., but from the beginning it was not so." (Mat 19.8).

In the Old Testament we also find polygamy (Lamech in Gen 4.19; Jacob in Gen 29.21–30; Elkana in 1 Sam 1.2; David in 1 Sam 25.43); this is an expression of the anthropological and social conditions of the Ancient Near East: and, as we have seen, there was the law on divorce. Nevertheless, the Old Testament shows a development towards monogamous marriage. It is only on the basis of such a high ideal of reciprocal and exclusive love and fidelity (cf. Mal 2.14–16) that the prophets could pronounce the covenant of the LORD with Israel as an eternal and indissoluble union between husband and wife (Hos 1–2; Is 54; Jer 3; Ezek 16; cf. Cant 8.6). Jesus draws the ultimate consequence of this view and excludes divorce (cf. also Mark 10.11–12; Luke 16.18). Paul makes an explicit reference to Jesus' ruling: "To the married, I give this command – not I but the Lord – that the wife should not separate from the husband...and that the husband should not divorce his wife." (1 Cor 7.10–11). There is, then, a transition from the possibility of polygamy to a monogamy in which the husband could repudiate his wife, and then to a monogamy without divorce, in which the partners have the same legal status: neither husband nor wife can divorce the other. Both are called to commit themselves to an enduring and loving union of life together which expresses the ideal of that union willed by the Creator.

d. Divine worship

124. Immediately after the antitheses Jesus takes up the topic of almsgiving, prayer and fasting, three important expressions of divine worship (Matt 6.1–18). He does not criticise these practices as such, but he blames a mistaken way of practising them, with the intention of being praised by others; he asks for a practice concentrated exclusively on the union with God the Father.

The right manner to offer various forms of divine worship is an important topic in the Old Testament. The Old Testament interpretation of the different kinds of divine worship (fasting, the Sabbath, sacrifices, laws on purity and impurity) manifests a growing care to safeguard the principal purpose of worship, communion with God. The accurate observance of the respective laws was not an end in itself, but a means to avoid anything that could be an obstacle to the power issuing from God, the Holy. All forms of divine worship are fulfilled in the sacrifice of Christ

1) Sacrifice in the Old Testament

The Psalms not only exhort Israel to venerate its God but also make reflections on the true nature of worship, and criticize current sacrifices (Pss 40.7–9; 50.7–15; 51.18–19; 69.31–32). From this point of view the psalms reflect the prophetic reproaches to the sacrificial system (Is 1.10–17; 43.23–24; Jer 6.19–20; 7.21–23; 14.11–12; Hos 6.6; 8.13; Amos 5.21–27; Mic 1.10;

2.13). Because of the varying contexts in which this general theme is treated these texts are not homogenous, but they agree in their understanding of the nature and purpose of sacrifices. God has no need of them, but the people do need them as expressions of the proper praise of God and of loyalty to the covenant. Israel must constantly keep in mind what God had established when he made his covenant: not sacrificial offerings, but persistence in the knowledge of God (Hos 6.6), observance of the law (Ps 40.7–9) and obedience to God's commandments (Jer 6.19–20; 7.21–23). The prophetic criticism of the cult and of sacrifices touches their interpretation, not their existence itself. It is aimed at purifying the special relationship of Israel with the LORD, inaugurating a new era of authentic worship in the place in which the LORD makes his name to dwell.

2) The sacrifice of Christ

A fundamental trait of the Letter to the Hebrews is its distinction between two phases in the history of salvation, the era of the Mosaic covenant and the era of salvation through Christ. In the central part of this letter (8.1–9.28) the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ and of the new covenant is underlined. The author critiques the cult of the first covenant in 8.3–9.10, and, in 9.11–28, speaks of the personal sacrifice of Christ that establishes the new covenant.

With Christ the old cultic system is set aside and a totally new situation is created. The ancient cult was often formal, external, conventional, and it was necessarily so since human beings were unable to offer perfect worship. Christ inaugurated a true, personal, worship that establishes an authentic communion with God and with those around us (Heb 9.13–14). The blood of Christ has a far superior power because it is the blood of one who: 1. offers himself to God, 2, is immaculate, and 3, gives himself through an eternal spirit. The contrast with the old sacrifices is clear.

1. The high priests offer animals that are forcibly driven to be sacrificed. Christ offers himself to death voluntarily. In the old dispensation the value of the offering derives from the blood, while in Christ's sacrifice the value of the blood derives from the offering. His blood is efficacious because it actualizes the perfect offering of his whole human existence. It is no ceremonial offering, but an existential one, described in 5.8 as obedience done in suffering, and in 10.9–10 as a personal fulfilment of God's will.

2. The high priests could not offer themselves, because they were human and sinners, needing a mediation which they sought, according to the law of Moses, in the offering of animal blood (Heb 5.3; 7.17–28). Instead, Christ, being immaculate, free of any taint of evil, could offer himself and shed his own blood effectively, precisely because of his personal integrity.

3. The high priests were priests according to the law of fleshly prescriptions (cf. 7.16; 9.10). Christ offers himself animated "by an eternal spirit" (9.14). A motive of human generosity was not sufficient to realize the perfect offering of himself; the power of a love, given by the Holy Spirit, was necessary. This third aspect is the most important of all. Christ's blood acquires its value through its relationship with the Holy Spirit.

Because the sacrifice of Christ is perfect, its efficacy is complete. "The blood of Christ....purifies our conscience from dead works to worship the living God." (9.14).

3) New worship

The purification of conscience through the sacrifice of Christ manifests itself in a new way of life, which is presented as the only true worship, the only "service to the living God" (Heb 9.14).

In Christ alone are we capable of authentic divine worship, a spiritual worship. Through the sacrifice of Christ Christians are purified and rendered capable of producing works pleasing to God. They can be defined as a "royal priesthood" (1 Pet 2.9), as a "holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God" (1 Pet 2.5; cf. Ex 19.16). The life of Christians must be a spiritual worship, a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God (Rom 12.1; 15.16). Referring to his martyrdom, Paul likens himself to a libation poured over the sacrifice and over the offering of the faith of his church (Phil 2.17). It is not only the Christian's death, however, that should be sacrificial, but also the earthly, physical life of the Christian. The traditional material sacrifice, distinct from the person who offers it, is substituted in Christianity by the offering of the person itself and is identified with the very existence of the offerer

2.3.2. Implications for today's world

125. The biblical phenomenon of a deepening awareness of moral duties retains its sharp relevance. The great problems of humanity today may suggest a movement in the opposite direction, a continual increase of means of destruction that threaten the very existence of humanity and its resources. In this situation a more faithful attention to the words of Jesus and a more intense commitment on the part of Christians to follow his example and his teaching are necessary.

The results of our study on advance are certainly useful. We shall limit ourselves to three points as examples. The 'greater righteousness' of the kingdom outlines three principles that determine all service of the faithful, an unlimited willingness to forgive, unconditional loyalty to one chosen partner for better or for worse, and a spiritual, interior worship of God that leads to a solid commitment to the transformation of the world. These norms of behaviour are fundamental for any form of Christian service; they make of every human activity a response of gratitude to the revelation of God's love.

In a more practical way our reflections on the advance and refinement of conscience can help pastors and all who work in the field of formation in their assessment of the progress made by persons or groups. For example, from the starting point of reflections on vengeance, so deeply rooted in sinful human beings, or ideas that circulate in a society increasingly permissive about divorce and all morality, or popular devotional practices which, though admirable, are sometimes entirely exterior, it will be possible to work out strategies to help brothers and sisters to advance step by step on the way of evangelical perfection (teleiôsis); they can also be challenged, in their life decisions, by the radical demands of Christian ethics on both the social and the individual level. Even cases of imperfect moral teaching in both Testaments can stimulate believers to a better understanding of the difficulties to be overcome on the way towards the perfection of the divine exemplar.

2.4. Fourth specific criterion: the community dimension

126. The Bible underlines the essential community dimension of morality. This dimension has its motivation and its expression in love and is ultimately rooted in the nature of God and of the human person, created in God's image.

2.4.1. Biblical data

127. In biblical perspective the human person is not an isolated and autonomous individual but essentially a member of a community, belonging to the covenantal community, to the people of God, which in the New Testament is also described as the body of Christ (1 Cor; Eph; Col), to which individuals belong as members, or as a vine, into which individuals are grafted as

branches (John 15). In this fundamental relational framework the objective of human living is not the formation of a perfect, independent personality, but the formation of a member living perfectly the relationship into which that member is inserted. It follows that the norms of society cannot be deduced from single members; they constitute the patrimony of the community, in which they must be preserved and developed. This of course does not dispense with the conscientious responsibility of individuals for their behaviour. Indeed in order to avoid inept decisions, the individual conscience must be aware of the situation we have just described and use it as a guide for action.

a. The formative power of membership of a community

1) In Israel

128. While the Israelite tribes follow the normal dynamic and historical development of any ethnic group, the Bible treats in a special way the birth of the people of God as a religious community in response to his call. This community has competence to teach and to sanction corresponding moral conduct.

Scripture describes various stages of this religious history, from an embryonic period in which the patriarchs' family becomes a tribal community, living no longer in slavery but in the freedom born of the exodus. Israel's faith is vividly described in the key text of Ex 15, it recognizes God as sovereign, proclaims Israel as the elect people of God and affirms that he will make them live around God's dwelling, the sanctuary. This anticipates the key role that worship and the sanctuary will have in the formation of the people of God, first in the tent in the desert and later in the first Temple in Jerusalem, with the ark of the covenant in its midst. The community created around this centre constitutes the beginning of a new world order (Ex 40; 1Kings 8). Here Israel will be instructed in the law, here the people will obtain forgiveness, and to this place the nations will come to learn the Torah. At the same time the Bible stresses the frequent lack of faith and infidelity of Israel towards its God, particularly during its journey in the desert (cf. Ex 19–24; 32–34).

After the period of the conquest the Bible outlines the transition from desert community to state with the institution of the monarchy, and later the division of the community into northern and southern kingdoms. While the monarch and his court take on some of the religious functions, care of the sanctuary, the priesthood, and the cultic regulations, the people as such remain the principal partner of the covenant with God (1 Kings 8.27–30). Israel's infidelity during the period of the monarchy causes a further development in the concept of the religious community of Israel: God creates the people anew as a holy 'remnant' that will inhabit a purified Jerusalem (Is 4.2–4). This new religious community is not restricted to the land of Israel but extends also to those in exile (Jer 29.1–14; Ezek 37.15–28).

From Amos onwards the pre-exilic prophets strongly criticized Israelite worship by opposing authentic obedience towards the LORD, particularly as regards the practice of justice and righteousness, to empty sacrifices (Cf. Amos 5.11–17; Hos 6.6; Is 1.11–17; Micah 6.6–8; Jer 7.1–8.3). This critique of false worship and of disparity between ritual and morality in Israel remains a key element in biblical tradition and an important component of moral reflection.

After the trauma of the collapse of the monarchy and the exile God's power renews the religious community of Israel. Following their return the exiles reconstruct the sanctuary and also restore the Torah to its normative place as the centre of public life and of personal conduct (Neh 8-10). Israel no longer has its national sovereignty and autonomy (except in a brief period under the Hasmonaean dynasty), but its religious identity is seen as founded on obedience to the Torah

and on worship offered by a community faithful to God.

Through all circumstances, and despite the various forms and situations of the community, the individual Israelite never appears as an isolated and autonomous person, but always as a member integrated into the community. There are differences in the roles played by the individual, patriarch, strong guide, king, priest or simple farmhand, but it is essential that every member of the community should be subject to its laws and participate in its worship.

2) Among Christians

129. The first Christian community that was gathered around the person of Jesus viewed itself in continuity with the people of Israel, bound by the same moral responsibilities inherent in belonging to that community.

This continuity is clear in the picture Luke presents of the Jerusalem community in the first chapters of the Acts of the Apostles. The Spirit, sent in the name of the risen Christ, enabled the followers of Jesus to form a community that incorporated the ideals of Israel, and expectations of the last times (cf. especially the summaries in the first chapters of Acts: 2.42–47; 4.32–37; 5.12–16). Traits characteristic of this ideal community include: 1. Fidelity to the teaching of the apostles (2.42); 2. Koinônia, a profound bond of faith and love among its members (1.14; 2.1; 4.32); 3. Common worship, especially in the celebration of the Eucharist, in the breaking of the bread at home, and in prayer in the Jerusalem temple (2.42, 46); 4. Community of goods so that no one was in need (2.44; 4.34–37); 5. Spiritual communion among the members, not mere friendship, but a profound unity of faith (e.g., 2.44; 4.32; 5.14); 6. Continuation of Jesus' mission of healing and pardoning, evidenced by the deeds and the witness of the apostles (cf. 2.43; 3.1–10; 4.5–12).

It is important that membership of the Christian community implies tasks and moral qualities reflecting the mission of Jesus himself and the permanent values of the biblical tradition. Thus members of the community are bound to render true worship to God, to take care of others, to form a community of love and friendship, to share earthly goods so that no one is in need and to continue the mission of healing and reconciliation, following the example of Jesus himself in his proclamation of the kingdom.

Similarly, Paul and the other New Testament traditions present the essentially communitarian context of morality. According to Paul the individual Christian is plunged 'into Christ' by baptism and is empowered by the Spirit to lead a life 'worthy of his calling' (Rom 6.3; Eph 4.1). Membership of Christ, hence of the Christian community, makes the individual Christian capable of putting aside the 'works of the flesh' and of practising 'the fruit of the Spirit' (Gal 5.16–26). The vices and virtues listed by Paul are predominantly of a social nature. The fruits of the Spirit, such as "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control" (Gal 5.22) imply an interrelationship between members which springs from Christian faith. When Paul lists the various gifts and charisms with which the Spirit fills the Church he marks out 'love' as the 'greatest way' (1 Cor 13.13). Paul's eloquent description of the expression of love in the community is one of the most fascinating passages of the New Testament (1 Cor 13).

The Holy Spirit is a key factor for the understanding of the Christian community in the New Testament. In Luke-Acts the Spirit sent by the risen Christ animates and inspires the community, empowering it to carry out its mission to the ends of the earth (Acts 1.8). Similarly, in Johannine theology the Spirit-Paraclete encourages the post-Easter community and enables it to remember and understand the teaching of Jesus (John 14.25–26; 15.26; 16.12–14). In Pauline

theology the various gifts of the Holy Spirit lend dynamism and cohesion to the Christian community (1 Cor 12.4–11). Above all, the power of the Holy Spirit makes the Christian capable of breaking the power of sin, of venerating God authentically and of living a life marked by the fruits of the Spirit.

In correcting the Corinthians' faulty manner of celebrating the Eucharist (1 Cor 11.17–34), Paul shows that the moral values involved – respect for others, a sense of justice and compassion – have their origin not in social conventions or in the demands of friendship, but in the intrinsic character of the Christian community as a living embodiment of the message of Christ and as a community enriched by the power of the Spirit of God. Such a community, and the members that constitute it, are led to act in a manner that corresponds to their true identity and purpose. The moral imperatives of this community may coincide in certain points with the norms of behaviour deduced from reason (e.g., respect for others), but their full expression and motivation derive from a different immediate source, that is, from the identity of this community as the body of Christ.

b. Principal values in interpersonal relationships

130. Membership of the community is essential in both the Old and New Testaments. The individual member is instructed by the community and by its authoritative traditions in values and moral responsibilities. In the Old Testament writings the covenant community, with its cult and the teachings of the Torah, together with its interpretation, is a primary source for a just manner of life. The New Testament communities build their moral consciousness on the teaching and the mission of Jesus, while at the same time they refer to the OT tradition and consider themselves in continuity with the people of God, Israel. The values received through such a formation refer primarily to interpersonal relationships both within and outside the community.

1) Within the community

131 Innumerable texts deal with interpersonal relationships. The Decalogue itself lists fundamental duties towards other people. In Israel's legal codes attention to the physical and economic welfare of others is indispensible. Killing or wounding a person demands punishment, as the story of Cain and Abel in Gen 4.1–16 shows. The Mosaic law requires that during the harvest a portion should be left aside for the poor and the stranger (Lev 19.9–10; Deut 24.19–22). The weaker members of society, such as the classic trio 'the widow, the orphan and the foreigner' must be treated with compassion and respect (Deut 16.11-12; 26.11–12). Justice outlaws deception or cheating by usury or fraud. (Amos 2.6-8; Ezek 18.10–13). The mission of Jesus himself, who is full of compassion and commits himself to heal the sick and feed the hungry, is in line with the same fundamental biblical ethic. In Matthew's gospel Jesus declares that he does not abolish the law and the prophets, but he 'fulfils' them; in this way he clarifies the end and purpose intended by God for the Torah (Matt 5.17). The disciples are directed by Jesus to continue the same mission in the life of the Church (Matt 10.7 – 8).

The tradition of love of God and neighbour as fundamental requirements of the Law was deeply rooted in the Old Testament and repeatedly confirmed by Jesus. The answer he gives the scribe who asked about the greatest commandment of the law was: " 'You shall love your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt 22.37–40; cf. Mark 12.29–31). In other texts Jesus insists on the duties towards others. He summarizes the requirements of the law in the 'golden rule': "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is

the law and the prophets." (Matt 7.12). In answer to the rich young man who asked what he should do to obtain eternal life, Jesus presents an summary of the Decalogue: "You shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; ; You shall not bear false witness; Honour your father and your mother; also, You shall love your neighbour as yourself." (Matt 19.18–19).

It is notable that all the examples of 'the greater righteousness' mentioned in the Sermon on the Mount indicate duties towards others: reconciliation with one's brothers and sisters (Matt 5.21–26), avoidance of lust of the eyes (5.27–30), fidelity to the marriage bond (5.31–32), sincerity of speech (5.33–37), abstention from revenge for injustice (5.38–42). Lastly, in a saying that is considered to be the most characteristic of Jesus' teaching, the love of enemies is said to be the ultimate moral expression that renders a follower of Jesus 'perfect' or 'complete', as the heavenly Father is perfect (5.43–48; cf. also Luke 6.36: "Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful."). In the end the disciple will be judged on faithfulness to these commandments of love, mercy, pardon and righteousness, illustrated by the parable of the sheep and the goats in Matt 25.31–46.

This strong emphasis on the relational and community character of moral duties is confirmed by other New Testament traditions, especially in the Johannine literature. John's gospel condenses the ethical requirements of discipleship to the formula: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (15.12). Jesus' death is the supreme example of this love required of the disciples. His death is the supreme act of love of one who gives his life for his friends (15.12–14), and this highest example of human moral conduct becomes the criterion for the responsibility of Christians towards one another (15.12–17). The same concentration is repeated in the Johannine letters, especially in the first: "For this is the message you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." (1 John 3.11).The intrinsic bond between the love of God and love of neighbour represents the characteristic mark of biblical ethics and of the teaching of Jesus: "The commandment we have received from his is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." (1 John 4.21). In Paul too, love constitutes the supreme and imperishable gift (1 Cor 13.13). Similarly, in James 2.8 and Hebrews 13.15-16, the adoration of God and the obligation to generosity are intimately connected.

2) Towards those on the margins of the community

132. The legislative texts of the Torah insistently provide for care of the ger, the foreigner resident among the Israelites. This care may sometimes appear to be merely humanitarian (cf. Ex 22.20; 23.9), but in other texts, especially in Deuteronomy, care for the stranger acquires a more theological motivation. Israel must keep in mind its own experience in Egypt and must care for the foreigner in the same measure that God cared for the Israelites when they were strangers in Egypt (cf. Deut 16.12). The Law of Holiness goes a step further regarding the resident foreigner, who is no longer a simple object of the law, but a 'subject', responsible, together with the local Israelites, for the holiness and purity of the community: "The alien who resides with you shall be to you as the citizen among you; you shall love the alien as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God." (Lev 19.34).

In the New Testament Jesus' mission is presented as full of solicitude for the 'lost sheep' of the house of Israel (Matt 10.5; 15.24) and the proclamation of the gospel is characterized as 'good news to the poor' (Matt 11.5; Luke 4.18; cf. James 2.2). The gospels unanimously describe Jesus as a healer, moved to compassion towards all who find themselves in need: "The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them." (Matt 11.5; cf. Matt 4.24-25; Luke 4.8–19).

These healing actions represent only the first steps towards the healing of the whole person, which consists in the forgiveness of sins (cf. the healed and pardoned paralytic in Mark 2.1–12). Jesus receives sinners, dines with them, and calls the tax-collector Levi to be his disciple (Mark 2.13–17), he accepts the hospitality of Zacchaeus (Luke 19.1–10). In the same way, despite the objections of his Pharisaic host, Jesus accepts the tender love of a sinful woman in Simon's house and offers her pardon and welcome (Luke 7.36–50). In answer to criticism by the scribes and Pharisees of his keeping company with tax-collectors and sinners, Jesus illustrates his view of the community, from which no one is excluded, by means of the parable of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the prodigal son (Luke 15). He also teaches the disciples never to 'scandalize', to 'despise' the 'little ones' in the community; they should rather seek them out with compassion (Matt 18.6–14). Reconciliation and pardon must characterize the community gathered in the name of Jesus (Matt 5.21–26, 38–48; 18.21–35).

Jesus grants forgiveness not only by words addressed to the sinner, but also by taking upon himself the sins of humanity: "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases." (Matt 8.17).

Jesus looks upon his liberating and healing activity as a sign of the coming of the kingdom of God, which will restore human life and lead it to its fullness (Matt 12.28; Luke 11.20), Lastly, the death of Jesus on the cross and his resurrection from the dead represent the ultimate act of liberation and healing because they defeat sin and death, free humanity from their power and lead to the perfect kingdom of God.

3) Towards those outside the community

Gentiles also are welcomed by Jesus whenever they approach him to experience his healing power, for example the Canaanite woman in Matt 15.21–28, the centurion in Luke 7.1–10. In his programmatic discourse at Nazareth Jesus recalls Elijah's mission to the widow in Zarephath in Sidon and the healing of the Syrian Naaman by Elishah, events beyond the boundaries of Israel (Luke 4.25–27). In Matthew's version of the narrative about the centurion Jesus refers to Is 43.5 and foresees that "Many will come from east and west and will eat with Abraham and Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven." (8.11). In the parable of the great banquet the guests who had refused to come are replaced by "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame", and afterwards by those "along the byways and hedges" until the house is full (Luke 14.16–24).

In these rich traditions of the mission of Jesus, his sending to heal, to help the poor and the marginalized, to receive back sinners and also gentiles, the gospels confirm the community orientation of the Bible. The key question of biblical morality now is: which are the virtues, practices and types of relationships that should characterize a community gathered in the name of God?

4) Validity for the whole human race

134. The Bible does not consider the moral traditions of the Torah and of the teaching of Jesus as a sectarian ethic, applicable only to Israel or to the Christian community (cf. Is 2.3; Amos 1–2).. The wisdom tradition affirms that the very structure of created reality reflects the values of the Torah and the will of God for all human beings (cf. Prov 8.22–36; Wis 13.1, 4-5). Paul echoes this view when he asserts that also the gentiles can know God and his will by contemplating the created world (Rom 1.18–25; cf. 2.14–15). The same applies to the moral teaching of Jesus, who addresses not only the disciples but, through them, the whole world, with his revelation of God's will (Matt 28.18–20). The biblical tradition therefore presumes that the same moral responsibilities are entrusted to all human beings as part of the creation and as God's image, although the power of sin and alienation from God can warp moral decisions.

2.4.2. Implications for today's world

135. The community is a fundamental datum of moral life according to the Bible. It is founded on that love which surpasses individual interests and holds all human beings together. This love is ultimately rooted in the life of the Holy Trinity itself, is manifested by the dynamic power of the Holy Spirit and is, at the same time, the source and aim of any authentic Christian community.

a. Various types of community

Communities are to be found on the various levels of human life, each with their own dynamic and specific moral requirements. The family is the most fundamental human community, decisive for the social and moral formation of the individual. The Church too is a community, for whom the gift of faith is essential. The Church is entered by means of baptism, and Christian love constitutes her intimate unitive bond. Moral duties derive from membership of the civil community, both local and national. Moreover, modern society today is ever more conscious of the global dimension of the human community and of the moral obligations for the economic, social and political wellbeing of the entire family of nations. In the social teaching of the Church the Popes have, for over a century, underlined the moral duties that derive from membership of a community at various levels.

b. The fundamental importance of love

Among the many values relevant to all moral decisions that concern the Christian of today, it is love, that profound undertaking to transcend oneself for the good of others, that determines all other social values within the Christian perspective. While the civil community is obliged to ensure equitable social structures to protect citizens and to guarantee the necessities of life, the Christian moral perspective is complementary, transcending the requirements of justice. Social justice created by political means cannot satisfy all the cravings of the human heart. For this is required the moral commitment of the Church to further neighbourly love in the diverse spheres of the human community. The traditional works of charity of the Church, on both the individual and the institutional level, can inspire the political order to acknowledge the transcendent beauty and the ultimate destiny of the human person created by God.

c. Present necessities

The community dimension of biblical revelation can help people of good will to recognize essential aspects of today's moral life. The excessive individualism that menaces the very structure of so many communities, the isolation of the old and handicapped, the lack of protection of the weaker members of society, the growing disparity among the rich and the poor nations, the recourse to violence and torture out of malice or for political ends are strongly at variance with the biblical view of the human person and of the human community. The teachings of the Church on the obligations of love of neighbour derive from the teaching of Jesus and of the entire biblical tradition, and constitute a direct challenge to these moral deficiencies. At the same time, the Church's commitment to the loving service of the poor, the sick and the weak serves also as an inspiration to civil communities which are determined to construct a just society.

2.5. The fifth specific criterion: finality

136. Hope in a future life with God, founded on the resurrection of Jesus, provides a decisive motive to seek and practise God's will. It is a norm of behaviour.

2.5.1. Biblical data

Humans are mortal and live within time. They thus come face to face with the existential enigma of the interruption of their loving relationship with God, unless they can transcend the boundary of death. Israel lived out this drama of uncertainty. However, her idea of creation and of the covenant led her gradually to the conviction that God's sovereignty of the cosmos and of history could not suffer defeat in the face of the human condition of mortality. The Lord could not leave in the power of death those who had placed their trust in him. Nevertheless for a long period the way in which God displays his fidelity towards his faithful after their departure from their present existence remained a mystery.

The New Testament lives out a new experience. It attains the certainty of a revelation that reaches its peak in the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus, thus opening a clear eschatological perspective. We shall outline some strands of biblical discourse that refer to afterlife, and present it as the motive for moral decisions.

a. The development of hope in the Old Testament

1) The beginnings of this hope

137. In so far as we can distinguish the earliest phases of Israelite religion we can say that there was a time when hope of a retribution in future life played no specific role in moral motivation as it was still embryonic. The earliest expectations seem to have consisted simply in a return to tribal origins, reunion with the ancestors in death (1 Sam 28.19; 2 Sam 12.23). At this stage the recompense of virtue is a long life (Gen 25.8) and a long line of descendants. In the end all, both good and bad (Ezek 32.18–31), go down to Sheol, a place of darkness, silence, impotence and inactivity (Ps 88.3–12), in total contrast to life, because there it is impossible to praise God. The negative effect of this belief upon morality reaches its peak in the later book of Qoheleth; it is presented as one of the main reasons to view as vanity any striving for the good and any moral endeavour: "For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so does the other." (Eccles 3.19; but also note the variant in 12.7).

Long before Qoheleth, however, another world-vision was emerging. It implied that death and Sheol were subject to the lordship of God over heaven and earth. The psalms in particular witness to the conviction that even after their descent into the grave the Lord does not abandon those who hope in him and live according to the commandments. God's communion with his faithful cannot be interrupted by death. It is a feature of love that it lasts forever, and God's faithfulness as well as his omnipotence were held to be able to respond to this situation: "Your steadfast love is better than life." (Ps 63.4), although the psalmist did not yet have any idea of how God, in practice, would have maintained his steadfast love towards his faithful. Long before the hope of resurrection had begun to be affirmed, the concept that God's fidelity towards the righteous could suffer no interruption was already alive in Israel's creed (Ps 16.8–11; 17.15; 49.14–16; 73.24–28). On the lines of this development the faith that God's solidarity with those who followed his commandments would never fail, not even in the afterlife, came to form part of moral reasoning.

2) First signs of hope in the resurrection

According to some exegetes, a well known passage in Job reflects how, through the enduring love of God, the afterlife has come to be understood as an incorporeal existence. This rests on a translation of a very difficult passage in Job 19.26: "And after my skin has been thus destroyed, without my flesh I shall see God". Whatever the meaning of this uncertain text may be in

Hebrew, the Septuagint already, later taken up by the Church Fathers, interpreted it as a witness to faith in the resurrection: “For I know that he is eternal who is about to deliver me, and to raise up upon the earth my skin that endures all this.” (Job LXX 19.25–26).

The persecution in the Maccabean period offers the first clear connection between mortality and the afterlife, in the form of resurrection and new life for the martyrs, of torment for the persecutors and their descendants (2 Macc 7.9–36). The same thought is expressed in Dan 12.2: “Many [which in Aramaic does not have any overtones of exclusion] of those who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt”. Here resurrection to life is not limited to martyrs but extends to “all those whose names are found written in the book”. It is resurrection of the whole person. No division of body and soul is envisaged, because Hebrew anthropology cannot conceive such a separation: the human being is not divided in this way, but is an animated body.

In the Book of Wisdom future recompense and punishment after death are an important moral motive. Under the influence of Greek philosophy, more specifically middle Platonism, future hope is expressed in terms of immortality of the soul. The souls of the righteous are at peace (3.1–3) as they were found worthy to be with God, to live in loving company with him (3.5, 9). By contrast, adulterers have neither hope nor comfort on the day of judgement, because the end of the race of evildoers is dire (3.19). The immortality of the soul is seen as a personal immortality.

In conclusion we can say that these glimmers of light open up new possibilities. While they clarify the ephemeral nature of present goods, they teach us to give absolute preference to any solution grounded on the lasting friendship of God for his human creatures.

b. The example of Jesus

138. Against the denial by the Sadducees of the resurrection of the dead Jesus resolutely affirms it. The Father’s transcendence, his love and his will are decisive factors for Jesus’ own conduct. He expects from his followers the same conviction, and this is the example which the martyrs follow.

1) The attitude and teaching of Jesus

Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees’ story in Mark 12.18–23 was his question: “Is it not this the reason you are wrong, that you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God?” He concludes with the statement: “You are quite wrong.” (12.27). He confirms with special insistence the erroneous nature of their denial of the resurrection of the dead, linking this to their ignorance of God and to their false concept of God’s power. For Jesus God could not present himself as “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” (12.26) without being in living union with these persons, “He is God not of the dead, but of the living”. (12.27). In Jesus’ view resurrection of the dead and eternal life were linked. His entire attention was concentrated on God; everything depends on a right understanding of God’s power and of his attitude towards human beings. The goal of human life, which determines human behaviour, is not an abstract idea of eternal life but a living relationship with God, who created and destined human persons for an endless communion of life with himself.

For Jesus himself the horizon of his life and actions was the Father, his living union with the Father. He lived for the Father, with the Father and in the Father; that is why he took upon himself the mystery of the passion, till its climax in his death on the cross. He says of himself: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work.” (John 4.34). Doing

the Father's will, fulfilling the mission assigned him, is essentially the way in which Jesus lives out his union with the Father. Faithfulness to the Father is the basis of all the actions and suffering of Jesus. This loyalty to his mission is the reason why he never yielded to any human pressure; it finally led him to death on the cross. It is, however, his 'only food', it gives him life, it is the source and strength of his life. No earthly life, nor all the goods of this world, no matter how procured, constitute Jesus' supreme value. His supreme value is exclusively his union with the Father, lived out by doing his will.

Jesus himself put forward an example, and he expects his disciples to follow the path he trod. For them too fidelity to the Father's will is decisive. At the conclusion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus offers a kind of summary in the words: "Not every one who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matt 7.21). It is precisely in an eschatological perspective, indicating the condition for entry into the kingdom of heaven, that Jesus presents his Father's will as the decisive norm of morality.

Union of life with the Father in the kingdom of heaven is impossible without having lived in union with him in our earthly lives, by doing his will.

Jesus indicates more precisely what should determine the disciples' behaviour and their sufferings: "I tell you, my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that can do nothing more. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has authority to cast into hell." (Luke 12.4–5). This is an instruction among friends; Jesus wants to protect his friends, his disciples, but also the crowd (cf. 12.1) against the error of shutting themselves within an earthly perspective. He therefore broadens the horizon and points to God and to his power beyond earthly existence: God can both exclude from, and welcome to union of life with himself. If Jesus speaks of fear he does not intend to cause terror or anguish, he only wants to call to a serious and profound awareness of the real situation. This awareness, that takes into account the eschatological perspective, must determine all actions. Human behaviour should be motivated not by the evil which may happen during our earthly existence, but by what happens to us in the end, if God pronounces a negative judgement.

In another instruction, also to "the crowds together with his disciples" (Mark 8.34), Jesus explicitly mentions following the way of the cross: "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it." (Mark 8.34–35). He concludes: "Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels." (8.38).The only way to save one's life is union with Jesus and his gospel, because Jesus is united with the Father, the only source of all life. To maintain this union with Jesus it may be necessary to join him in renouncing earthly life and accepting the cross. Following Jesus and union with him cannot be partial; they must be total. Again the eschatological perspective requires and justifies this conduct. It is through his way of life that Jesus enters the glory of his Father, and will come again and be made manifest in this glory. Only a permanent union with him and a courageous loyalty to him and to his word make it possible to share his glorious life with the Father, hence to save one's life.

2) Following the example of the martyrs

139. Instances of martyrdom are reported in some later books of the Old Testament (1 and 2 Macc). These cases are related and interpreted in a situation when the awareness of the future destiny of mankind has already reached maturity. The martyrs teach survival in another life, and

that the values at risk in our present concrete decisions are absolutely radical, so much so that they motivate and require the most demanding options.

In the New Testament Jesus himself is the martyr par excellence. His total fidelity to the mission received from the Father, leading to death on the cross, provides an example to his followers. This becomes clear in Paul's exhortation to Timothy: "Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you were called", then he reminds him of "Christ Jesus, who in his testimony before Pontius Pilate made the good confession" (1 Tim 6.12–13). The first Christians who accepted death and shed their blood to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus were called 'martyrs', that is, 'witnesses'. They attest in the most extreme way that union with Christ is more precious than anything else. Stephen, the first Christian killed for his faithfulness to Jesus, was such a martyr in the eyes of Paul (Acts 22.20); the Book of Revelation also often speaks of these witnesses of Jesus (Rev 2.13; 6.9; 17.6; 20.4).

In the earliest theologians themes concerning martyrdom abound. Suffice it to mention Ignatius of Antioch, who brings together the Pauline idea of union with Christ and the Johannine theme of life in Christ with the ideal of the imitation of Christ. The passion of the Lord is re-enacted in the death of his witnesses.

When the martyrs sacrifice their lives they bear witness to essential criteria of conduct: to the absolute primacy of God and the direct consequence, that fidelity to him may require heroism and renunciation of all other values, to the relationship between an ephemeral present and a future that offers a salvation beyond all human dimensions, to conformity with Christ, the 'martyr' of God, and imitation of his example.

c. The eschatological perspective in the Pauline writings

140. As in all other writings of the New Testament the eschatological perspective in Paul's teaching is fundamental and omnipresent, even when it is not explicitly mentioned. For Paul God the Father is he who raised Jesus from the dead (cf. Gal 1.1; Rom 10.9, etc.). The horizon of our existence is no longer confined to our mortal, earthly life, since life in eternal communion with the risen Christ opens up an unlimited horizon. It changes the circumstances and the parameters of life on earth and becomes the determining norm governing our present existence. Some Pauline texts that speak of resurrection and judgement express this particularly clearly and outline the consequences for moral conduct.

1) The Resurrection

In the long chapter 1 Cor 15 Paul presents the close connection between the resurrection of Jesus, the resurrection of Christians and the assessment and the consequent evaluation of our present life. At the end of the chapter he sums up the consequences: "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labour is not in vain." (15.58). The 'work of the Lord', that is, faithfully following the example of Jesus, is certainly laborious (cf. 15.30–31), but it is not vain as it leads to the resurrection, to a blessed life with the risen Christ.

The consequences of Jesus' resurrection are also described in Col 3.1–11, where, among other things, we find: "If you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth....Put to death, therefore, whatever in you is earthly." (vv. 1-2, 5). This saying must be read on various intersecting levels: Christ is risen; we all participate in his resurrection. This happens in an incomplete way; still less is it automatic; deliberate participation by the

human partner is required; this also demands a discernment between what has a worldly origin, prompted by the flesh, and what belongs to the order where Christ now is. Since Christ has preceded us to the eschatological state, the world of earthly values, far from disappearing, now takes on its true and limited dimensions.

2) Judgement

From time to time Paul makes reference to the judgement that awaits us. Whatever we have done in our lives will be assessed by the Lord and will receive from him appropriate recompense. This truth should spur us on to live in a responsible manner so as to await God's assessment with confidence.

In Rom 14.10–12 Paul states: "We will all stand before the judgement seat of God...So then, each of us will be accountable to God." The aspect of personal responsibility thus comes to the fore. If life ended in nothingness, our manner of life on earth would be a matter of indifference. In fact our life is directed towards an accounting for which our present way of life is decisive.

Human beings have their own ways of judging persons and events, but Paul says: "It is the Lord who judges me....Therefore do not pronounce judgement before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness, and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive commendation from God." (1 Cor 4.4-5). The Lord's assessment is the only valid one, for he alone knows the nuances of human behaviour.

This outcome of the judgement will depend on the actions of every person during life and will vary from case to case: "For all of us must appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil. " (2 Cor 5.10).

The factual way of retribution for those condemned is expressed in a general manner by 'wrath and fury', 'anguish and distress' in Rom 2.8–9, or negatively 'will not inherit the kingdom of God' in 1 Cor 6.10 , Gal 5.21. The destiny of those who will be saved will always be a grace, never simply their deserts; it will consist of 'eternal life in our Lord Jesus Christ' (Rom 6.23).

d. The eschatological perspective in the Book of Revelation

142. In the general context of the distinctive eschatology of the Book of Revelation the coming of Christ has a distinctive outline. It is viewed not as an instant, conclusive and spectacular return of Christ - portrayed perhaps as a descent from heaven – but as a presence that is perceived as real, traverses in crescendo the whole extent of history, ever increasing until it reaches its fullness. Within this framework the Book of Revelation, in continuity with the realized eschatology of John's Gospel, stresses the actual presence of the Risen Christ in the midst of his Church and of the world. This presence, borne by the activity of the Spirit (cf. Jn 14.16-8), gives place to a new phase of the incarnation in which the Crucified and Risen Lord exerts his direct influence first on the Church, and through various activities of the Church, on the rest of the world. He thus progressively imprints on everyone and everything his own values and vitality. The final result of this activity and its ramifications within history will be to frustrate and destroy the diabolical forces manifested in the evils of history, and to establish a community of love and sharing between Christ, God, the Spirit and the Church. This will be fully realized in the New Jerusalem.

1) The coming of Christ in the Church

143. A first aspect concerns the Church seen from the inside. This is developed in the first part of the Book of Revelation (1.4–3.22). There is a coming of Christ that refers to and involves the Church as such, if it is understood in the sense of that dialectic which we have already encountered between the local and the universal community. The texts that specify it (2.5, 16; 3.11), as well as the broader context (Rev 2–3) in which they are inserted, show that this coming consists in an ever more intense presence of Christ in his Church.

The moral implications of this coming and presence of Christ imply on the part of the Church, a strengthened and renewed faith and generosity which enable the Church to respond to Christ's activity on her behalf. Even more specific are the demands on the Church contained in the imperatives addressed to her: "Repent" (Rev 2.5, 16; 3.1, 19); "Do not fear what you are about to suffer!" (2.10); "Only hold fast to what you have until I come." (2.25); "Remember then what you received and heard; obey it and repent." (3.3); "Be earnest, therefore, and repent." (3.19).

Above all, the requirement is imposed on the Church to listen to the voice of the Spirit, who, in the second part of the Book, will guide her to make the appropriate moral choices for co-operating with the coming of Christ which is taking place in history.

2) The presence and coming of Christ in history

144. In the second part of the Book of Revelation we find a significant shift in the activity of the risen Christ from the internal situation of the Church to the world of people who are still outside it.

This kind of world suffers the pressure of the diabolical forces aimed at imposing a way of life opposed to that willed and planned by God, an anti-kingdom, a kind of anti-creation. The Book of Revelation specifies some details of this diabolical pressure: it does not act directly; it infiltrates into existing human structures and works through them. Opposed to the worldly system is that of Christ, consisting above all of Christ himself, represented by the Lamb (5.6), who dominates the whole of the second part of the Book. Revelation interprets all this activity, the Christ-Lamb's own, as a coming. It is the coming of Christ in history, parallel with his coming in the Church.

The moral consequences of this coming of Christ within history are numerous; they are all based, however, on the fact that Christians, as we have already seen, are mediators, as 'priests of God and of Christ' (20.6), between Christ's urgency to penetrate every detail of history and the actualization of this urgency. Christians must have the boldness to bring their Christ to light (cf. 12.1–6), implanting his values in history until that eschatological fullness which will mark the culmination of his coming.

3) The eschatological fullness of the coming of Christ

145. Christ's coming within the Church, as we said above, is entirely marked by his love, a reciprocal love that now belongs to the human category of betrothal, since it requires a corresponding response. The Church is already the betrothed who adorns herself to become the bride. This she does by co-operating actively with Christ's coming in history. When this coming takes place it will be accompanied by the 'the wedding of the Lamb' (19.7). The Church, now the bride, no longer the betrothed, will be able to love with a love corresponding to Christ's own love, and he will endow his bride with that richness of which he is the bearer (cf. 21.9–22.5).

A gradual development is also to be found in Christ's coming within history. At its close this coming negates all the powers of evil, the active protagonists in the anti-creation drama. The

‘kings of the earth’ (cf. 19.17–19), the first and the second beast (19.20), ‘the devil who deceives them’ (20.10) and who is at the root of every anti-creation evil, will disappear from the scene of history. At the end Babylon, expression and symbol of the forces opposed to the kingdom and to creation, will crumble (cf. 18.2). A new world pervaded with the newness of Christ will take the place of the first.

The author of the Book of Revelation looks to this final outcome for the Church, still on her way. Looking ahead towards its eschatological destiny, the Church, though feeling the anguish of a growing love, knows that one day she will succeed in loving Christ as he loves her. Intent with Christ on overcoming evil and enhancing good, her eyes fixed on the eschatological future, she is aware that the oppressing evil of anti-creation will cease, also through her own efforts. In the same way, all the good deriving from the newness of Christ, entering history, again through her contribution, will reach the climax of its crescendo in the New Jerusalem. The Church is truly convinced that she is weaving her bridal garment.

4) Conclusion

146. All the elements of this web of expectation and preparation bring about, within the Church, a forward movement towards that ‘plus’ expressed in the heartfelt invocation: “The Spirit and the bride cry: ‘Come!’” (22.17). To this invocation Christ himself repeatedly gives the reassuring answer: “See, I am coming soon!” (22.7); “Surely, I am coming soon!” (22.20). He thus promises another imminent phase of his coming, not the concluding eschatological one, and alerts the Church to keep watch. That ‘plus’ of Christ to which the Church aspires will soon happen, she will see it both in herself and in the rest of the world. It will be a step forward toward the nuptial event and the new Jerusalem.

2.5.2. Implications for today’s world

a. Facing the present

147. Human life is related primarily to the present. The present is beautiful, a fleeting shadow of God’s eternal present. It is sure of what it possesses, its measure is reality. It is also appreciated because it is the only moment in which responsibility and human endeavour take shape.

Yet the present is characterized by obvious limits, due to its insecurity and imperfection on the one hand, and its ephemeral condition on the other. It not self-sufficient, as is evident from all those systems of thought enclosed in an illusory autonomy, and by what we have experienced in our own times, the downfall of ideologies. Nor is this without historical precedent.

The illusion based on the present and the disappointment that always follows can provoke people to take refuge in consumerism, ever more refined and demanding. It lacks prospects however, and becomes the source of further disappointment, nor can it be defeated if we remain within the frame of thought inherent in secularism.

Hope brings equilibrium to the instability of the present, because it is a motivated opening to a future, founded on the eternal stability of God. Heb 13.14 declares: “For here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” Nothing is more effective for orientating our actions and our lives than awareness of the ephemeral dimension in which our desires and deeds now move. A hierarchy of values must be created whose ultimate reference is to another, not to oneself alone, to the future, not to the present. The ‘other’ is the risen Lord, who has gone to prepare a place for us (Jn 14.2), and yet remains our hidden interlocutor in an everyday life that experiences all the difficulties and joys of faith and hope.

Faith calls for the conquest of immediacy. Hope bears an anticipation of the future, in continual dialogue with Him who is past, present and future.

b. A call to heroism

148. This gentle interlocutor, however, who fills and illuminates the future of the believer, makes radical requests and has high expectations, claiming to be the ultimate values, and demanding the sacrifice of all other values. It is here that the appeal for heroic witness and sacrifice is born. Our own times have seen many examples of martyrdom, of loving renunciation of a present sacrificed in view of a greater future.

Religion, especially Christianity, faces the objection that it exercises a fateful influence, retarding the urgency to transform unacceptable systems of oppression, summed up in the expression 'opium of the people'. The disciple of the Risen Lord knows that this does not correspond to the truth, since membership of the kingdom imposes the obligation to create an order increasingly similar to that for which the Saviour died, and for which he goes on working day by day until its complete manifestation. It is precisely because the risen Lord has anticipated and is preparing this future that the subordination of all intermediate values and the maximum commitment to Christian witness makes sense. An encouraging feature of this commitment is the harmony between means and the end. Jesus took upon himself the task of combating sickness and hunger with the precise purpose of bringing about that final liberation from all evils which will be achieved when we shall be in perfect union with him.

Christian hope, then, is not simply directed towards the future, it has immediate moral consequences for this present life. Realized eschatology implies that it is the Christian's duty to live now with an eye to that future which faith in the resurrection anticipates. Christian faith in bodily resurrection and in the final transformation of the created world also has important implications for ecology and respect for human life. (cf. Rom 8.18–21).

c. From an eschatological perspective to new perspectives

149. The picture presented by the criterion of finality opens important orientations for the situations of daily life. The discussions on which decisions are based occur always on the level of principles, appealing to values regarding the autonomy of human decisions, the rights of the sciences, the independence of conscience, and in the last resort, the claim that might is right.

The criterion of eschatological tension helps to correct these tensions. An individual's horizon is not circumscribed by that individual's own personality, but occurs in a dialogue with a far greater and more trustworthy personality. It is not limited by the confines of the present moment, but oversteps these limits to find itself in the only future which is truly 'final'. Hence, decisions are valid only if taken in dialogue with the Creator and Saviour, and only if they issue in action valid not only for the present but also for a future which has no end.

2.6. Sixth specific criterion: discernment

150. All agree that it is not possible to place all the moral rulings we find in the Bible on the same level, nor can we attribute equal value to all the examples of morality presented by Scripture.

For both pedagogical and theoretical reasons it seems more useful to focus our argument on a key notion in moral theology: prudence. This implies, on the intellectual level, a sense of proportion, and on the level of practical decisions, caution. In the first sense it distinguishes

fundamental requirements that have an obligatory universal value from simple counsels, and also from precepts linked to a particular stage of spiritual development. On the level of practical decisions prudence requires a previous assessment of actions and their likely consequences, discernment of the damage they might cause, and an avoidance of errors and unnecessary risks in the application of these principles.

In matters of morality Scripture furnishes us with markers essential to making sound decisions. It does this on three levels: literary, spiritual on the level of community and spiritual on the personal level.

2.6.1 Biblical data

a. Literary discernment

A correct and nuanced moral judgement inspired by the Scriptures necessarily presupposes a critical reading of the texts that takes into account, first and foremost, the canonical dimension of the Bible. (cf. PBC, The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church, I,C).

1) Literary context

As a matter of principle it is imprudent to refer to a legislative norm or to an exemplary narrative of the Bible without taking into account its literary context. One must also pay attention to literary genres and forms (imperatives, casuistry, catalogues, lawcodes, parenesis, sapiential forms) that often qualify the weight of an ethical discourse.

The particular authority of certain texts in moral matters depends on their literary positioning. We have already put this criterion of discernment into practice when speaking of the Decalogue and of the Sermon on the Mount, particularly the beatitudes, respectively the foundations of the first Law and the new Law; their precedence earns each of these texts very high authority.

Even more so, the place they occupy in the biblical canon reinforces the basic theological structure ‘gift-law’ which we explained fully in the first part. Carefully composed salvation narratives precede the Decalogue in both Exodus and Deuteronomy. The same is true of the Sermon on the Mount.

2) Theological basis

To base a moral decision today on the various norms decreed in the Bible special attention must be paid to those supported by a theological foundation or justification. In this way it will be easier to distinguish rulings linked to a particular culture from those of transcultural value.

For example, in the first part of the covenant code (Ex 21.1-22.19), the prescriptions do not have any theological foundation. They probably correspond to the written form of traditional legislation reflecting the jurisprudence practised at the city gates to order social relationships. In their formulation and content these casuistic laws are very similar to prescriptions gathered in the various lawcodes of the Ancient Near East, especially laws on the periodical freeing of slaves (Ex 21.2–11). By contrast, in the apodictic section of the covenant code (Ex 22.20–23), as in the Deuteronomic code, the law is often given a theological foundation, for example, the nearness of the Lord to the poorer social groups (Ex 22.20–26), or the explicit reference to Israel’s origins (Deut 15.12–15; 16.10–12).

This relationship between continuity and discontinuity, between the moral thinking of believing

communities and that of the surrounding societies is equally to be found in the New Testament. Thus the Haustafeln (tables of domestic duties) in Eph 5.21–6.9 and Col 3.18–4.1), though having no strict literary parallels in Greek literature, are characteristic of the culture and wisdom of their times. Faith in Christ, however, imprints a specific significance on the social relationships between master and slaves and on the family relationships between parents and children, and husband and wife, though they also reflect the culture from which they stem. Hence, to throw light on family and social ethics today preference should be given to theological motivations: the presentation of Christ as model (Eph 5.23, 25–27, 29), to draw inspiration form God's own pedagogy (6.4), doing his 'will' (6.6), imitating the 'Heavenly Lord' in whom "there is no partiality" (6.9), seeking "what is acceptable in the Lord" (Col 3.20), cultivation of "fear of the Lord" (3.22) - to be understood more deeply in the sense of religious awe – acting always "for the Lord" (3.23), looking forward to the final "recompense" (Eph 6.7–8; Col 3.20–4.1). As regards the sociological models then in vogue it is clear that in correct and sound exegesis they should not be unduly privileged or given perennial value. Models more compatible with our times should be sought, and, if these are lacking, another essential aspect of discernment is to be taken into consideration, spiritual discernment, above all with reference to the community.

3) Cultural background

Even if a theological foundation or justification is lacking one can very well succeed in determining whether a biblical norm is applicable to our present situation or not. Exegesis comes to the rescue by analysing the cultural background. Here are two examples regarding food prohibitions: "You shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk." (Ex 23.19; 34.26; Deut 14.21). This Canaanite custom, attested in Ugarit, passed through three biblical traditions, generally considered different from one another, and gave birth in Judaism to complex food laws that the Church respects, but has never felt the need to adopt, because from the point of view of Christian exegesis they reflect a particular culture.

The other example is more delicate: "You must not eat any fat or any blood." (Lev 3.17; 7.26; Deut 12.23–24); the New Testament takes up this prohibition unrestrictedly, to the point of imposing it upon Christians coming from paganism (Acts 15.29; 21.25). From the viewpoint of exegesis the explicit reason for this prohibition is not exactly theological, it rather reflects a symbolical representation: "the life (nepheš) of all flesh is in the blood" (Lev 17.11, 14; Deut 12.23). After the apostolic era the Church did not feel obliged to make this a basis for formulating precise rules for the butcher and the kitchen, and still less in our own times to prohibit blood transfusion. The trans-cultural value underlying the particular decision of the Church in Acts 15 was a desire to foster the harmonious integration of the various groups, albeit at the price of a provisional compromise.

4) Persistence

The persistence with which a moral theme appears in diverse biblical texts, both from the standpoint of literary traditions, authors and dating, and from that of their literary genres, leads us to consider such a theme as structural and essential for the moral interpretation of the whole biblical corpus. For example, the privileged concern for the poor responds to this criterion of persistence: this theme is to be found from one end of Scripture to the other. Let us only present an a fortiori argument: Ben Sirach, with his leaning towards good food, wine and travel, almost makes of this theme a leitmotiv of his sapiential writing.

5) Refinement of conscience

Lastly, for proper discernment one must take into account the progressive refinement of the

moral conscience, especially in a global reading of both Testaments. We need not specify this point, since numerous examples have already been cited and discussed in the presentation of the third specific criterion, advance.

b. Community discernment

152. Evidently the process of discernment cannot be limited to exegesis, even if all the various resources of the diverse methods in vogue today are used. The community is an essential locus for biblical moral discernment.

1) The Old Testament

The Old Testament bears this out when it shows the need for an evolution of the rules of Israel's community life to meet new historical and social situations. We cite an example given importance by the revaluation of the rights of women in our times. The Book of Numbers puts the question of a new way of inheritance by female descendants in a tribe or clan (Num 27.1–11; 36.1–12). Moses is presented as the mediator who is empowered to present to the Lord the requests of the community and to communicate to the people the legislation which results from them. The text unites the expression of the people's needs with the intervention of qualified mediators (Moses, Eleazar) and the sovereign authority of the Lord.

2) The New Testament

Sometimes when dealing with decisions to be made, regarding law or custom, we become entrapped in matters of detail, either because these are important in themselves or because particular circumstances give them real importance. How can we distinguish between what is essential, not negotiable, and what is less relevant, hence negotiable? In the matter of ecclesial discernment the New Testament has left us a very relevant document, Acts 15.1–35. The problem was a new one. Some members of the community demanded of gentiles who had opted to become Christians that they opt also for Judaism in its totality, including the circumcision prescribed by the Torah (Gen 17.10–14) even for resident strangers (Ex 12.48–49). On the moral level this posed the problem of obedience to the expressed will of God. The narrative in Acts distinguishes three essential components of prudent discernment, a shared process, the search for a solution and a decision.

a) "The apostles and the elders met together to consider this matter." (Acts 15.6). We speak of such a procedure today as shared responsibility.

b) In the search for a suitable solution those responsible set out to distinguish what is necessary (the fundamental values to be preserved), from what is possible (the possibility of satisfying both sides). Four personages intervene. Peter gives the essential orientation: do not impose useless burdens. He gives three theological reasons: God makes no distinction of persons; the Holy Spirit has worked the same signs among the gentiles as among the Jews; and, above all, faith is a pure gift of God (15.7–11). Paul and Barnabas call as witness their own experience, the language of facts (15.12). Then James, the sage, proposes a compromise: no burdens, but at least avoid scandal and keep others in mind (15,13 – 21). It is a temporary compromise on some points to resolve a crisis. A little later Paul himself has Timothy circumcised.... for fear of the Jews (Acts 16.1–13). The prohibitions about idol offerings, blood and meat of strangled animals (15.20) did not survive within the Church, as shown by later history. The purpose of this prudential decision was precise and circumstantial, the recovery of unity within the community. The underlying transcultural value may be expressed in this way: an openness to difference, a certain social pluralism that already had precedents in the Old Testament theme of circumcision

of the heart (Deut 10.16; Jer 4.4; cf. Rom 2.25–29).

c) In conclusion, the result of the discernment is communicated by a collective letter (15.23–29). Four elements deserve special attention. First and foremost the divisive effect of decisions made without mandate and outside the communion of the Church (15.24); then the declaration: "The Holy Spirit and ourselves have decided...", an evident sign of an essentially spiritual discernment, made in a context of debate and prayer (15.28). We also observe, in the choice of the delegates, an openness to a broader consultation, involving "the whole Church" (15.22). Lastly, the appeal, not to blind obedience, but to the moral conscience of the communities addressed by the message (15.29b).

c. Personal discernment

153. In the preceding paragraph we spoke of a discernment based, so to speak, on a 'collective conscience' enlightened by the Holy Spirit. The expression itself, 'collective conscience' was made popular from Émile Durkheim onwards and now belongs to our modern terminology. In the Bible the word syneidêsis is confined strictly to the field of personal conscience, most frequently with reference to moral judgements. Moral 'conscience' and 'thought' are found in parallel once; twice 'conscience and 'heart' (kardia), in the Hebrew Bible this latter (lêbâb), is the seat and symbol of reflection, of the radical choice, of a moral decision. The Bible speaks of conscience as good, bad, pure, purified, noble, irreprehensible, weak or false. In discernment personal conscience, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, is a third locus, as important as any.

1) Paul gives an example of discernment on a problem which, in his times, was a thorny one: could Christians, without troubling their conscience, eat meat consecrated in sacrifice to idols and later sold in the marketplace (1 Cor 8.1–11.1)? With his subtle dialectic, buttressed by his authority, the apostle confronts two series of arguments. In favour of a positive answer he appeals to a theological basis: "an idol is nothing", hence, eating the meat in question has in itself no moral quality (8.4, 8; 10.19, 23, 30). Moreover he affirms an inalienable right, the sovereign liberty of the believer (9.1, 4, 19). This argument however, finds its opposite in a moral principle that stems from practical prudence, and which will be decisive in the end, the delicacy of charity. Love can compel us to renounce a right (9.5), to rectify our behaviour by taking into consideration the "weak conscience" of others to avoid scandal (8.7–13; 10.23–24, 28–29, 32–33). Whoever eats meat offered to idols regardless of others sins not against faith (principle of contrast) but against love (principle of community dimension).

2) Another complicated text 1 Cor 7.1–39) shows even better how, starting from a fresh and crucial question posed by the community, practical discernment can be reached. How can we assess the respective values of various states of life in relation to Christian ethics? Here Paul distinguishes four types of rules whose cogency can be placed in descending order.

a) First of all, an order of the Lord himself, hence unchangeable, because it is based on an explicit word of the gospel: "The wife should not separate from her husband." (cf. Mt 5.32; 19.9); If, by force of circumstances, they do separate, the commandment intimates that they either do not proceed to a second marriage or seek reconciliation (1 Cor 7.10–11).

b) What is to be done if a case is not foreseen in the gospel? Paul, pastor as well as theologian, confronts the concrete problem of a marriage between a believer and a non-believer. If the latter 'has been being sanctified' [a nuance of the Greek perfect tense] by his partner, that is, if they are living together in harmony and in a certain spiritual openness, the gospel precept is to be observed without any problem; but if the non-believing partner opts for a separation, then the other, Paul says, becomes free. The apostle specifies that he is grounding this decision upon his

authority: “To the rest I say: I, and not the Lord.” (7.12–16).

c) Paul then faces the question of virginity (7.25–38), a state of life not generally valued in the Judaism. He does recommend it, but only as a counsel: “Now concerning virgins, I have no command of the Lord, but I give my opinion as one who by the Lord’s mercy is trustworthy.” (7.25). He brings two arguments, one of practical convenience, to avoid preoccupations (7.32–35), the other is theological and spiritual, the shortness of time (7.29–31). In brief, Paul applies the same criterion of spiritual discernment as in the case of widows; he concludes: “I think that I too have the Spirit of God.” (7.39–40).

d) The other advice given by Paul answers directly the initial question posed by the community, the initiative of sexual abstinence for spiritual reasons by a married couple (7.1–9). Here too the apostle uses prudence in his discernment. He weighs up the concrete risks of an excessively radical position in the matter of conjugal sexuality. He authorizes abstinence as “a concession not an order” on three conditions: mutual consent by both partners, its provisional character (only “for a time”) and above all the essentially spiritual motive (“to attend to prayer”). He takes this occasion to affirm the perfect reciprocity and equality of husband and wife, whose bodies are the disposal of each other.

2.6.2 Implications for today’s world

154. It is evidently impossible to apply these reflections to all the new problems facing morality in our times: globalization in economics, communications, interchange, overpopulation, confusion in trades and professions, the development of sophisticated military technologies, the emergence of a hedonistic society, the uprooting of the traditional family structure, education, confessionality, etc. It suffices here to present some samples that may help not only moral theologians but also those groups and individuals who want to take the Scripture as a guide to sound discernment.

1) In matters of morality, as in any other field, the Church disapproves of every fundamentalist use of Scripture, for example an exegesis that isolates a biblical precept from its historical, cultural and literary context. A sound critical reading helps to distinguish on one hand those precepts and practices valid for all times and for all places, and on the other hand, those that could have been necessary in a certain period or in a particular geographical ambiance, but later fell into disuse, or became obsolete and inapplicable. Even more than the texts themselves, it is biblical theology, with an eye to both the Old and the New Testaments, that prohibits us from ever treating a moral problem as if it were entirely self-contained; it must be viewed in the context of the great threads of God’s revelation.

2) Ethics place considerable reliance on the resources of reason. We have seen how the Bible has much in common with the wisdom of various peoples (convergence), it also knows how to contest, to row against the tide (contrast) and to outdo (advance). Christian morality cannot in any way evolve independently of this new and mysterious breath that it derives from the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit. More than rational and sapiential, the discernment of believers is spiritual, and here the vital theme of the formation of conscience finds its place. Though the New Testament does not bring together explicitly the two terms moral ‘conscience’ and ‘Holy Spirit’ (Rom 9.1), it is clear that in the Christian order “discernment of good and evil” has as its cornerstone “the essential elements of the words of God” (Heb 5.12–14) that “lead toward perfection” (6.1) “those who have been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit” (6.4). Paul calls for “renewal of mind”, not to “be conformed to the world”, but “discerning the will of God - what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom 12.1; cf. Eph 5.10; Heb 12.21).

3) This discernment is eminently personal, and it is for this reason that in Catholic morality conscience has always been presented as the ultimate instance for decision making. But in this process of the formation of conscience – never definitively brought to a conclusion – the believer has the responsibility and the duty to confront personal discernment with that of those who are responsible for the community. In this case the models brought forward, among others from Acts 15 and 1 Cor 7 and 8, constitute an indispensible source of inspiration in the process of ecclesial discernment in the face of modern problems. In short, as regards Scripture, reconciling personal autonomy with docility to the light of the Holy Spirit given to the Church and through the Church is an integral part of moral discernment.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

155. Taking into account the development of inter-disciplinary approaches – ever more sophisticated – for dealing with the great human problems, and specifically the complexity of modern moral problems on both the individual and the collective level, the present document has no pretension other than that of being a modest seed for reflection. Nevertheless it does present some original points that cannot be passed over; we underline three of them. The document also opens some prospects for the future.

1. Original elements

156. 1) The fact that we have based our whole reflection on Sacred Scripture is an invitation to consider morality not from the point of view of human beings but from that of God; hence the concept of 'a revealed morality', which can be useful if properly understood. As we have seen, from its very beginning our approach differs from the ethics of natural morality, essentially founded on reason. This has potentially two advantages.

Firstly on the theoretical level: this concept of morality transcends the compass of a code of behaviour to be adopted or avoided, as also a list of virtues and vices to be practised or countered to guarantee the social order and the wellbeing of the individual. It belongs to astrictly spiritual sphere, in which the acceptance of God's gracious gift precedes and orientates human response. Many of our contemporaries, whether Christian or not, feel a pressing need today to redefine their view of things within a spiritual horizon, and to search actively in this direction. A morality as demanding as that proposed by the Bible, both from the spiritual and from the social point of view, is not beyond these conscious or unconscious aspirations of postmodern humanity, that is, a morality that does not shut us up in ourselves but opens our eyes to others, particularly the poor, far and near, and drives us to act untiringly in their favour.

Secondly, on the practical level, an approach such as ours helps us to define better three often subtle but mistaken approaches that have menaced, and still menace, several pedagogies both on the level of human values and on that of faith: casuistry, legalism and a strict moralism. The restoration of each kind of precepts to its proper place within the basic framework of God's gift, as suggested by the whole Bible, will give them new features and enhance their meaningfulness.

157. According full value to the basic text of the Decalogue, we have proposed an axiological rereading (in terms of values), that opens up a moral programmatic field rather than just a prohibitive and prescriptive one; a dynamic field, certainly more demanding but paradoxically more attractive and nearer to the ethical and moral sensitivities of our age. In his Sermon on the Mount, also a basic foundational document, Jesus clearly opens the way in this direction. The advantage is quite evident: the development of morality as a stimulusrather than a burden, that respects and favours an itinerary, launches towards the kingdom, and educates the conscience rather than giving the impression of imposing a leaden burden on our shoulder (cf. Mt 11.29–

30).

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158. The other original contribution of this document is its systematic presentation of eight general and specific criteria, drawn from the Bible itself, to approach today's moral problems, though definitive answers will require recourse to other modes of reflection and of making decisions. Rather than to give clear and precise directives, which are in many cases beyond our competence as exegetes, the purpose of our reflections is to commend an approach to morality in a different spirit, a breath of fresh air, derived from Scripture itself. Christian morality will thus be seen in all the richness of its various features:

- it is concerned first of all with the fundamental dignity of the human being (in line with the biblical vision of humanity);

- it seeks its ideal model in God and in Christ (following the example of Jesus);

- it respects the wisdom of various civilizations and cultures, and is therefore capable of listening and establishing a dialogue (convergence);

- it has the courage to denounce and curb moral options incompatible with the faith (contrast);

- it is stimulated by the evolution of moral positions within the Bible itself, and in subsequent history, to educate consciences to an ever greater refinement, inspired by the new 'righteousness' of the kingdom (advance);

- it is capable of reconciling the rights and longings of the human person, so strongly asserted in our days, with the demands and imperatives of collective living, expressed in Scripture as 'love' (community dimension);

- it has a capacity to present a moral horizon which, stimulated by the hope of an absolute future, transcends a short-sightedness limited to earthly realities (finality);

- it concerns itself with a prudent approach to difficult problems, making use of the triple recourse to exegesis, to the insights of ecclesial authorities and to the formation of a right conscience in the Holy Spirit to avoid creating 'short circuits' in the delicate process of moral judgement (discernment).

2. Perspectives for the future

159. The foregoing manifests on the one hand some strong lines of development, but on the other, the incomplete character of any document by the Biblical Commission on morality, a task impossible to bring to completion.

Certain problems still remain open. To limit ourselves to one example, the concept of 'natural law', of which some traces may perhaps be found in Rom 1.18–32; 2.14–15), and which involves, at least in its traditional formulation, philosophical categories extraneous to Scripture.

We hope that our reflections may encourage three types of activity in future.

160. 1) Dialogue first of all; we hope that not only specialists, moralists and exegetes in the Catholic Church will be engaged, but that such a dialogue will find an echo in believers of other

Christian traditions who share the same treasure of Scripture, as well as among believers of other religions who aim at a high standard of moral life. In particular a fruitful dialogue with the Jews, our ‘elder brothers and sisters’, may be of mutual help in placing the numerous laws, sometimes only relative, within the fundamental axis of the theological Law, in the sense of a ‘journey’ of salvation freely granted to humanity. Biblical morality cannot be imposed on others who do not share our faith, but as its purpose is to improve the nature and condition of the individual and of society, it is a valid proposal which we hope will be taken into consideration also by those engaged in spiritual journeys of another type.

161. 2) We also think that a reflection such as ours, if it arouses interest, may help pastors and theologians to find appropriate way of conveying the moral teaching of the Church so that it may be perceived in its positive aspect and in all its richness. If the Church is to remain faithful to Christ in the service of humanity she cannot refrain from presenting clearly the rights and duties of the believer and of every human being, and can therefore not abandon certain laws and prohibitions. Contrast, however, especially in the form of necessary conflicts, is one of the eight criteria enunciated above. A presentation of ‘revealed morality’ in all the breadth and fruitfulness of the biblical context may also sketch the contours of a renewed pedagogy.

162. Lastly, the present document needs to be brought to the ordinary people if it is to be effective. Only in this way can it help pastors, pastoral workers, catechists and teachers, and of course Christian parents who have the irreplaceable mission of educating their young people to life, to the faith, to a responsible use of their liberty and to guide them on the way of true happiness, which attains its goal beyond this present world.