

**ALL ETHICS IS SOCIAL AND PERSONAL: A RESPONSE TO CHRISTINA
ASTORGA’S “ALL ETHICS IS SOCIAL ETHICS”**

CHRISTOPHER P. VOGT

I would like to thank Christina Astorga for her paper. I would also like to thank CTSA President-Elect Susan Wood, S.C.L., for giving me the opportunity to speak to you this morning.

Dr. Astorga proposes three crucial, interrelated perspectives for contemporary Catholic social ethics: feminist, liberationist, and global. I will begin as she does with her discussion of feminist theologies. After a brief rehearsal of the undeniable fact that women coming from different cultures, races, classes, places and so on do not share a singular set of experiences, the bulk of Astorga’s discussion of the “feminist optic” highlights a series of problems that affect women around the globe. She concludes, “If there ever were situations in which our spirits and hearts are broken in the face of the suffering of others, it is difficult to think of situations other than that of women victimized in domestic violence, of women tortured and burned in dowry-related murders, and of AIDS-infected women stoned to death.”¹ Indeed, these phenomena are heart-breaking and disturbing. As one tries to articulate a response, it is difficult not to be at a total loss for words and to despair. Where are we to begin when we are confronted with a world that is so obviously not as it should be? I think that it may be wise to begin with the theological concept of social sin. Naming these problems as social sin will not solve them. I contend, however, that the theological concept of social sin can clarify what we are confronting as well as how it should be confronted.

I want to begin with the claim Dr. Astorga made in the very first sentence of her paper: “All ethics is social ethics.”² What does she mean by this claim? I am sure that she will correct me momentarily if I am wrong, but I do not think that she means to claim that there is no such thing as personal ethics. Rather, I think that she is emphasizing the social dimension of ethics as a sort of corrective to the overly personal and individualistic approaches that predominated in our tradition for centuries. In 1990, Gustavo Gutiérrez explained that he employed a similar strategy, writing that “the emphasis on the social dimension of sin is due to the fact that this dimension was so little present to Christian consciousness at that time” (referring to the time of the conference at Medellín).³ But in point of fact, ethics is always both

¹ Christina A. Astorga, “All Ethics is Social Ethics: A Feminist, Liberationist, and Global Optic,” in *CTSA Proceedings* 69 (2014): 47, 48.

² Astorga, 40.

³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *The Truth Shall Make you Free: Confrontations*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 136. The need for such a corrective was recognized at the international synod of bishops in 1971. The preliminary document to *Justice in the World* reads: “The faithful, particularly the more wealthy and comfortable among them, simply do not see structural social injustice as sin, simply feel no personal responsibility for it and simply feel no obligation to do anything about it” (no. 7). Cited in Peter J. Henriot, “Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition,” in James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, eds., *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry* (New York: Seabury Press, 1981), 127–44 at 131.

social and personal. Furthermore, I would maintain that liberationist approaches to ethics (including feminist ethics) have so strongly influenced the field of Catholic theological ethics over the last forty plus years that it may in fact be time to switch the emphasis and remind ourselves that even social ethics is also personal. Sin is both personal and social. Dismantling social sin and overcoming injustice in the world will require a conversion that is both personal and social.⁴ One of the reasons that the concept of social sin is so valuable is because it can help us to see more clearly how these two dimensions are related.⁵

Kristin Heyer's recent book, *Kinship Across Borders*, includes a very helpful distillation of recent Catholic theological scholarship on social sin. In that book she defines social sin as "unjust structures, distorted consciousness, and collective actions and inaction that facilitate injustice and dehumanization."⁶ Similarly, Kenneth Himes writes that "the term social sin is used to describe ills such as racism, sexism, and imperialism which have a systemic quality about them. That is, the disvalue involved is embedded in a pattern of societal organization and cultural understanding."⁷ These structures can be understood as the social manifestation of the sins of individuals accumulated over time; violent, selfish acts by individuals are reflected in a violent, victimizing social system.⁸ The result is institutions that seriously undermine human freedom, dignity, and flourishing, and in some cases make it difficult for people even to survive.

In addition to direct harm inflicted on the most vulnerable, structures of sin compromise the ability of everyone in that society to live as they should. Even those

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez captures this well. On the nature of Christian conversion, he writes: "The change called for is not simply an interior one but one that involves the entire person as a corporeal being (a factor of human solidarity) and therefore also has consequences for the web of social relationships of which the individual is a part . . . The conversion required will have to be radical enough to bring us into a different world, the world of the poor," "Conversion: A Requirement for Solidarity," *In the Company of the Poor: Conversations with Dr. Paul Farmer and Fr. Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2013), 74–5.

⁵ Mark O'Keefe, O.S.B. also offers a very helpful explanation of how sin and conversion must be conceptualized in ways that have both a personal and social dimension. He writes, "Social sin involves the embodiment of sin in social structures. These structures are the result of individual choices built up over time, but they gain an independence relative to human choice. Structures exercise an influence on human persons, for good or ill, even though they are unaware of their power. Because of the complexity and subtle power of structures, it may seem therefore that in order for social sin to be overturned structures must first be changed. Once the unjust structures are overturned people may be sufficiently free of their influence to effect and authentic personal conversion. On the other hand, it seems apparent that structures themselves cannot be overturned—at least in any lasting manner—without changing persons. Even if one could change every unjust structure, if one did not simultaneously change the hearts of men and women they would eventually rebuild the old structures of injustice or develop new and more resilient ones. Social sin exercises its influence not only exteriorly but also interiorly. See *What Are They Saying About Social Sin?* (New York, Paulist, 1990), 92–3.

⁶ Kristin Heyer, *Kinship Across Borders: A Christian Ethic of Immigration* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 37.

⁷ Kenneth Himes, "Social Sin and the Role of the Individual," *Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* (1986), 183–218 at 184.

⁸ Derek R. Nelson, *What's Wrong with Sin? Sin in Individual and Social Perspective from Schleiermacher to Theologies of Liberation* (New York: T & T Clark, 2009), 88.

who might not willfully inflict suffering or perpetuate injustice are drawn down by the gravitational pull of structural sin.⁹ Catholic social thought as well as liberationist theologies emphasize the social nature of the person. Moral agents (i.e., all people) do not exist in a vacuum where the balance between good and evil is maintained in perfect equilibrium. On the contrary, human beings are thoroughly conditioned by their environment, which is inevitably marked by social sin to varying degrees.¹⁰ As Kenneth Himes puts it, “What happens is that the error of others becomes the tradition of a community. The process of socialization in a world that is made up of unjust structures affects all human consciousness and leads to false consciousness as people adopt ideologies supportive of the unjust system. We are born not only into the world but into a worldview. In such a setting people may believe that they are doing the right thing and yet still be guilty of violating the ideals of God’s kingdom.”¹¹ In other words, social sin results in a sort of moral blindness that makes it difficult for us to realize that we have embraced a false consciousness that is contrary to the objective moral order.

Let me return for a moment to one of my main points in this response: ethics is both social *and* personal. It is necessary for ethicists to analyze social structures and call attention to the ways in which they perpetuate injustice. As Astorga says in her paper, ethicists must “dismantle, deconstruct, and destroy thought systems that give legitimacy to violence against women.” At the same time, we must note that these structures are always interacting with specific individuals. As Jon Sobrino has noted “these idols have particular agents who cause particular offenses.”¹² We must not see a closed system here, but rather one where individual men and women retain some level of freedom and also some level of moral responsibility.¹³ Thus ethicists must consider not only how to analyze, critique, and (when necessary) denounce systems and structures, we must consider what interventions might help individual persons to become sensitized to the negative effects of those structures and to begin to see how their support for or passive acceptance of social sin helps to perpetuate it.

What might such an intervention look like? I would contend that what we are talking about here is a sort of evangelization. What we are really asking here is how the church can better facilitate and support a conversion that is both personal and social. How can the church help people to overcome the blindness of social sin? In

⁹ O’Keefe, 62.

¹⁰ Heyer, 43.

¹¹ Himes, 192. Kenneth Himes makes a very similar point in “Human Failings: The Meanings and Metaphors of Sin” in *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues: Festschrift for James P. Hanigan*, ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 145–161 at 158.

¹² Jon Sobrino, *The Principle of Mercy: Taking the Crucified People from the Cross* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 62.

¹³ Although he recognizes that people can internalize the injustices perpetuated by social sin, Mark O’Keefe cautions against allowing “facile” claims of ignorance of the truth to dilute individual moral responsibility. Likewise, in his writings on social sin, St. John Paul II placed a very strong emphasis on individual responsibility. In particular, see *Reconciliatio et paenitentia*, no. 16, available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia_en.html, (accessed on June 18, 2014).

this regard it is important for the church to tap the potential of liturgy to reshape the moral imaginations of those who gather for worship. However, something more than “more Mass!” is needed. Participation in liturgy and the local church must be an occasion for critical reflection. Kristin Heyer proposes a very promising holistic model of how a local parish can effectively foster a conversion from social sin to solidarity. Her focus is upon how to foster the development of a critical consciousness on issues of immigration. She holds up Dolores Mission parish in Los Angeles as a model for integrating spiritual-liturgical practices, direct action, and political action. During the season of Lent in 2006, the parish undertook a month-long communal fast for justice for immigrants. The prayerful fast was supported by the church through prophetic preaching at the weekly liturgies and a parish-based voter education campaign on humane comprehensive immigration reform. Heyer writes, “participants conceived of the fast as both prayer (in terms of the desire to empty ourselves of what distracts us from knowledge of God’s love) and as an act of solidarity (a bond of sympathy with those who, like so many immigrants, suffer physical, spiritual, and emotional hunger).”¹⁴ In addition, the parish engaged in very public acts of faith/witness such as undertaking a Way of the Cross procession in Los Angeles that drew connections between the suffering of the undocumented and Christ’s passion.

I think that the above approach to confronting social sin fits well with Astorga’s proposal to engage in a praxis-based ethics that is suited to the local context while pointing to universally shared moral norms. Of course, the specific shape of efforts to resist structural sin and foster conversion would take shape very differently depending upon the context.

I would like to close by turning briefly to Astorga’s discussion of the global dimension of contemporary Catholic social ethics. I would like to make two points. The first actually ties in to her discussion of Stephen Pope’s article on proper and improper partiality. I would like to amplify his conclusion regarding hermeneutical privilege. Pope provides this quote from Jon Sobrino: “The poor are accepted as constituting the primary recipients of the Good News and therefore as having an inherent capacity to understand it better than anyone else.”¹⁵ Pope suggests that this is an “exaggerated claim of broad class-based epistemological superiority.”¹⁶ He acknowledges that the poor may understand in a special way how Jesus preached good news to the poor, but disputes the singular superiority of this vantage point. The poor are not granted a technical insight into how to resolve poverty; figuring that out remains a communal task. He sees hermeneutical privilege as justified because it fosters *inclusion* by disclosing and highlighting the experience and insights of people who previously had been ignored. It widens the circle of conversation rather than shifting authority from one group within the circle to another. It helps us attend to all relevant evidence by including the experiences of the poor and thereby promotes

¹⁴ Heyer 51.

¹⁵ Stephen J. Pope, “Proper and Improper Partiality and the Preferential Option for the Poor,” *Theological Studies* 54 (1993): 242–71 at 250. The quote from Sobrino is taken from *The True Church and the Poor*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 140.

¹⁶ Pope, 250.

“less ideological construals of current social arrangements.”¹⁷ The model here is full participation of all in the political, social, and economic life of the church and society. The insights of the poor and other new voices brought into the conversation do not function as trump cards.

My second and related point is that our reflections on social ethics this morning (both Christina’s and mine) have focused considerably on issue and matters of injustice. I think such a focus is appropriate. Attending to the needs of the world is properly one of the marks of contemporary Catholic social ethics;¹⁸ however, there is also a need to consider how issues of fundamental moral theology are to be reexamined in a global context. How might conscience, natural law, theological anthropology, and so on be enriched by an engagement with the global church? I had originally planned to give another example, but I think that it might be better for me to talk about yesterday’s interest group session Beyond Trento: North American Moral Theology in a Global Church. There Anna Floerke Scheid and Bryan Massingale both discussed how a theological anthropology deeply informed by African notions of the social nature of the human person, links among the dead, the living, and future generations, and so on might inform their own theological anthropology and the way that they teach, write, etc.¹⁹ How Catholic is the Catholic ethics we teach and rely upon for our scholarship if it does not incorporate this wisdom, they asked.²⁰ It was a fascinating conversation.

But let me bring my last two points together now. It is important to widen the conversation and to include voices previously ignored or never considered, but I think that conversations like yesterday’s point to the need for a more sophisticated theology of authority or perhaps a theology of catholicity. If global voices are to be integrated into the discipline in ways that go beyond tokenism and if fundamental moral concepts truly are to be reshaped by cultures that previously have not been part of the theological conversation then we must figure out a way to examine the authenticity of these proposals and concepts. We must remember that culture can sometimes be a

¹⁷ Pope, 265.

¹⁸ In my analysis of the work presented at the Padua and Trento conferences of the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church organization I note that the group clearly supports the point of view that “the world” should be granted a very substantial role in setting the research agenda for moral theologians. See Christopher P. Vogt, “Locating the Church in the World: Ethnography, Christian Ethics and the Global Church,” *Journal of Moral Theology* vol. 2, no. 2 (June, 2013): 157–71 at 166. On this point see Antonio Papisca, “The Needs of the World and the Signs of the Times: The Challenge of Human Rights,” in James F. Keenan, S.J., ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church: The Plenary Papers from the First Cross-cultural Conference on Catholic Theological Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2007), 11–19.

¹⁹ For a summary of that session, see the session report for the CTSA Interest Group “Beyond Trento: North American Moral Theology in a Global Church” in these *Proceedings*, 170.

²⁰ In exploring this question both Bryan Massingale and Anna Floerke Scheid focused in particular on the work of Bénédet Bujo, a Congolese theologian based at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. See Bénédet Bujo, *Foundations of an African Ethic: Beyond the Universal Claims of Western Morality* (New York: Crossroad, 2001). For Anna Floerke Scheid’s earlier work on a similar theme see, “Interpersonal and Social Reconciliation: Finding Congruence in an African Theological Anthropology,” *Horizons* vol. 39.1 (Spring 2012): 27–49.

source of blindness and error rather than insight. It is quite obvious that we would not want my American cultural perspective to reshape Catholic theological anthropology. If I said to you: "In my culture people are autonomous and have no obligations to others that they don't agree to contractually," hopefully you would tell me that my culture is wrong about that. You would inform me that my cultural perspective is inconsistent with a Catholic theological anthropology. The very communitarian African models of the human person are much more in synch with traditional Catholic Social Thought, but they must still be scrutinized. Although we should embrace a preferential option for previously excluded voices, a deeper engagement would seek to discern whether and how these voices enhance or run counter to Catholic Social Thought and similar benchmarks shared by the universal church. Obviously this is an enormous task. When I say that we must develop a theology of authority I do not mean to suggest a simple deference to the Magisterium but rather something that we here at the CTSA in dialogue with colleagues around the globe develop together as we wrestle theologically with identity and difference, unity and fragmentation.