Social sin and solidarity: A case study of abortion in Vietnam

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SOCIAL SIN AND SOLIDARITY

A Case Study of Abortion in Vietnam

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INTRODUCTION

Since the encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII at the end of the nineteenth century, the Catholic Church has increasingly paid attention to social issues with its tradition of Catholic social teaching. Through encyclicals and other documents that address a variety of problems such as poverty, injustices, violations of human dignity, and degraded ecosystems, the Church involves herself in the mission of protecting and promoting the human dignity and the integral development of all human beings. Contemplating the suffering of all human beings around the world, the Church opens her heart to listen to the cries not only of Catholic believers but also of the whole human family. *Gaudium et Spes* remarks that "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ."[1]

Unfortunately, due to the complicated sociopolitical situation and the particular focus of moral formation, Catholic social teaching is neglected in the program of theological formation both in seminaries and schools of theology of religious institutions in Vietnam. Moral formation in the Vietnamese Church focuses more on helping future priests acquire the necessary skills for exercising confessional ministry or simply for solving some moral cases in their ministry. In other words, the focus of formation in moral theology in the Vietnamese Church still reflects an individualistic, act-oriented approach that dominated before the Vatican Council II. This approach neglects a social understanding of sin and fails to address social issues and structural injustices.

To address social issues and to demonstrate the negative impacts that evil structures have on individuals, Catholic theology has developed the concept of social sin, which by some

[1] Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 1.

authors, is primarily understood as the sum total of personal sins. It is interesting to note that the account of social sin emerged in the context of a local church, namely, the Latin American church. At the second general conference of Latin American Episcopates in Medellín, the Latin American bishops introduced the language of social sin into magisterial teaching. Margaret Pfeil notes that "the Latin American bishops did not intend to undermine the importance of personal agency in formal sin, but they did want to draw a closer connection between human sinfulness and the pervasive webs of structural injustice enveloping their countries."[2] Although Pope John Paul II played an important role in incorporating the concept of social sin into the magisterial teaching of Catholic theology, he feared that too much emphasis on the social dimension of sin runs the risk of losing individual moral responsibility.

Given the above, this thesis attempts to explain how it is important for the Church to address social issues, especially social evils and unjust social structures, which may deform or distort a person's freedom in making a moral decision. Based on contextual analysis, this thesis argues that an emphasis on the social dimension of sin is important and necessary in the Vietnamese context. Such an emphasis does not mitigate the personal dimension of sin but rather calls all members of the society to be aware of sinful situations for which they are partly responsible.

To achieve the proposed objectives, this research employs descriptive-analytical and critical approaches. Concretely, the descriptive-analytical approach will be used in describing the theoretical principles and definitions of the theology of social sin and that of solidarity as well. Then, a critical analysis will be employed in elucidating the arguments from relevant literature on the theme. Moreover, Y-Lan Tran, a Catholic moral theologian and medical

[2] Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002): 137.

doctor, reminds us that "to be relevant and meaningful, theology has to reside in the life current of Asia's peoples as it helps bring the good news of Jesus' resurrection to them."[3] With this in mind, to contextualize and concretize its arguments, this thesis connects the theoretical aspects of our research to the concrete situation of Christians in the context of Vietnam by using abortion in Vietnam as a case study. Therefore, besides using the Catholic moral perspective, this thesis will develop its arguments based on other resources that are drawn from Vietnamese tradition and cultures. Finally, given our goal, the thesis also uses the results of other disciplines, especially social analysis and medical studies related to our case study.

In order to answer the issues posed above, this thesis is divided into three chapters. Chapter One presents abortion in Vietnam as a case study setting a context for our discussion, focusing especially to investigate the ethical view regarding the fetus in the Vietnamese context. Then, the chapter makes an ethical evaluation of this case study in light of the teaching of the Catholic Church. Finally, the last part of the chapter discusses to what extent a moral agent is responsible for his or her moral acts that are done under an errant conscience.

Chapter Two will begin with a brief historical survey of the notion of social sin in Christian theology. Then, it will investigate the understanding of social sin in both the theology of John Paul II and liberation theology and explain how some structures cause evil. Finally, the chapter presents how sexism, collective culture, and unjust laws all violate human dignity, limit and violate human freedom, and distort the capacity of a moral agent to make a good moral judgment.

Chapter Three will present solidarity as a good way by which we are able to respond to social sins and unjust structures. To do so, this chapter first investigates the key elements of

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[3] Y-Lan Tran, "Vietnam in Transition: Theological and Ethical Challenges," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Brazal (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 43.

the Catholic ethic of solidarity. Then, it searches for a comprehensive account of the virtue of solidarity, noticing especially how one's cultivation of solidarity can transform the society which one inhabits. After that, it explains the relationship between the virtue of solidarity and the structure of sin and, in a more particular way, how the practice of solidarity addresses the social problems in our specific research on abortion. Finally, some practical and pastoral implications will be drawn as a result of our discussion.

Chapter 1: MENSTRUAL REGULATION OR ABORTION? AN ETHICAL EVALUATION OF ABORTION IN VIETNAM

1. Menstrual regulation or abortion?

a. A brief overview of the population control concerns and legislation

In this chapter, to set a context for our discussion it is important to figure out the development of laws and policies regarding abortion services and family planning in Vietnam from its independence in 1945 and onwards. Traditionally, in Vietnam, abortion was considered an immoral action and forbidden by law. However, this tradition was changed in 1945 when, along with gaining independence, abortion was legalized in Vietnam.[4] The Law on Marriage and Family was adopted in the 1960s. In the same year, by realizing difficulties due to a large and growing population and its pressures on the land and other resources of the country, the Government of North Vietnam decided to introduce a population policy. With this new policy, each family has to limit its size to two or three children. In order to implement this

[4] See Tine Gammeltoft, "Between 'Science' and 'Superstition': Moral Perceptions of Induced Abortion Among Young Adults in Vietnam," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 26 (2001), 316.

policy, a fine, which was an average of a monthly salary, was introduced and commonly enforced.

Following the reunification of North and South Vietnam in 1975, the government expanded family planning services in the south, where fertility rates had been higher than in the north due to the influence of the pronatalist policies enforced by the French and by the Catholic regime.[5] After 1979, the Government reconfirmed the importance of the family planning program as part of the national population policy. In 1988, with the establishment of the National Council of Population and Family Planning, the government strongly implemented a population policy which called for each family to have a maximum of two children. Along with this policy, on the one hand, the government provided free contraceptives, abortion services, and cash incentives for sterilization; on the other hand, it also used many kinds of campaigns to convince people that having one or two children meant that their family would be happier and have a higher quality of life. Regarding abortion, two categories of pre-gnancy termination are available: Menstrual regulation refers to a suction procedure performed within five weeks of conception, whereas abortion refers to all other procedures performed after this period.[6] Long and his colleagues note that many couples increasingly viewed abortion as a method of contraception. He contends that the availability and easy access to abortion was a key factor in reaching family planning and population targets.[7] For this reason, it is noteworthy that abortion was believed to have been adopted as an alternative to contraception.[8]

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[5] See Teerawichitchainan Bussarawan and Sajeda Amin, "The Role of Abortion in the Last Stage of Fertility Decline in Vietnam," *International Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health* 36, no. 2 (2010), 81.

[6] See ibid.

[7] See Lynellyn D. Long et al., "Changing Gender Relations in Vietnam's Post Doi Moi Era," *Policy Research Report on Gender and Development Working Paper Series*, no. 14 (2000), 22.

[8] See Bussarawan and Amin, "The Role of Abortion in the Last Stage of Fertility Decline in Vietnam," 80-89.

In the late 1990s, government policy shifted from birth control to reproductive health. Bang and others note that the new focus on reproductive health also was present in the Vietnam Population Strategy 2001-2010 that meant a relaxation of the former one-to-two-child policy.[9] However, due to a slight increase of fertility in 2005, the government reintroduced the former two-child policy to address control population increase. It also introduced fines for government employees and party members who violated the policy. The two-child policy was again affirmed in 2008 by an ordinance amending article 10 of the Population Ordinance.[10]

b. Definition of menstrual regulation

Menstrual regulation can be a morally ambiguous term covering a range of medical conditions. For instance, a woman who suffers from irregular menstrual periods (i.e., dysfunctional uterine bleeding) can undergo treatment to regulate her periods, usually with a hormonal pill. In this case, menstrual regulation is morally good. But in the Vietnamese context, in reality, the term menstrual regulation is also used to refer to situations where the woman in early pregnancy does not have a menstrual period and seeks to terminate the pregnancy by using abortive medicine (usually RU468). In this case, the treatment is said to "induce the menstrual period," but in reality, this is a euphemism for medical termination of an early pregnancy. This case is totally different from the treatment for irregular menstrual periods when no pregnancy is involved. For many Vietnamese women, menstrual regulation is a convenient and familiar procedure that carries fewer of the uncertainties and perceived risks that are associated with modern contraception and perhaps with an unwanted pregnancy.

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[9] See Pham Nguyen Bang et al., "Analysis of Socio-Political and Health Practices Influencing Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet Nam," *Reproductive Health Matters* 16, no. 32, (2008): 176-184.

[10] See Population Ordinance 06/2003/PL-UBTVQH11 January 9, 2003 amended by the Ordinance no 08/2008/PL-UBTVQH December 27, 2008., Decree 20/2010 ND-CP implementing the article 10 of the Population Ordinance. See Supplement A.

c. Menstrual regulation and abortion in Vietnam

Although abortion was legalized in 1945, it was introduced and practiced widely only in the early 1960s in Vietnam,[11] where it was available upon request.[12] It is difficult to estimate the number of abortions in Vietnam because the government tends to hide this sensitive information. According to the Tuoi Tre News, nearly 40 percent of unintended pregnancies in Vietnam is due to failed contraception.[13] Some sources confirm that the figures from local health agencies indicate that each year 1,400,000 abortions are performed. That includes 500,000 among women under the age of 18.[14] Moreover, health authorities estimated that about 25 percent of abortions are unsafe in Vietnam, adding that deaths due to complications remain close to 13 percent of all maternal deaths.[15]

Government reports also show that annually Vietnam's public hospitals perform between 250,000 to 300,000 abortions. However, it is important to note that these are only cases that were recorded officially. The actual number is estimated to be much higher as many women opt for private facilities due to fear that their family might find out. Many young women seek a "secret abortion" because they want no one to know. In 2016, a survey conducted by Vietnam's General Statistics Office revealed that 70% of the country's "secret abortions"

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[11] See Gilda Sedgh, Stanley K. Henshaw, and Susheela Singh, "Legal Abortion Worldwide: Incidence and Recent Trends," *International Family Planning Perspectives* 33, no. 3 (2007): 216-225.

[12] By 1989, the Law on Protection of People's Health was approved, affirming the people's rights to choose contraceptive methods. Furthermore, it states that: "Women have the rights to have an abortion, to receive gynecological diagnosis and treatment, and health check-up during pregnancy, and medical service when giving birth at health facilities."

[13] See Tuoitrenews, "Vietnam's Abortion Rate among World's Highest as Contraception Fails," (Sept. 2007), https://tuoitrenews.vn/news/society/20170927/vietnams-abortion-rate-among-worlds-highest-as-contraception-fails/41775.html

[14] See Thanh Thuy, "Against Abortion, for Life: Vietnamese Catholics Mark International Women's Day," *Asianews* (Sept. 2012), http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Against-abortion,-for-life:-Vietnamese-Catholics-mark-International-Women's-Day--24191.html

[15] See VnExpress, "Abortion Rate in Vietnam Highest in Asia - VnExpress International," *VnExpress International* (Sept. 2016), https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/abortion-rate-in-vietnam-highest-in-asia-3476746.html

involve teenagers aged 13 to 19.[16] Public services tend to be used more by married women, while the country's plethora of private clinics[17] see many younger, unwed women.[18] In general, most women seeking an abortion are girls between 18 and 25 years of age, with some having undergone the procedure two or three times.

There are many reasons explaining the high abortion rate in Vietnam. As we presented above, some contend that this situation is a consequence of the government's ambitious population policy. Others suggest that a high frequency of abortion is a result of the lack of sex education, especially about contraception. Sex education is practically nonexistent in many Vietnamese schools, and is even less frequent at home. As a result, young Vietnamese, both male and female, are often ignorant when it comes to sex and contraception. From a cultural social perspective, sexism, collectivist culture, and consumerism may have a role to play in the high abortion rate in this country. Before discussing more deeply how these elements might influence one's decision regarding abortion in the next chapter, we need to first understand how the Vietnamese consider the moral status of the fetus.

d. Moral status of the human embryo and fetus in the Vietnamese tradition

Peter Phan remarks that, as distinct from the Chinese outlook, the traditional Vietnamese worldview is expressed not in philosophical works but primarily in folk songs, proverbs, and poems.[19] This phenomenon occurs because this manner of expression reflects a reality that is rooted in daily experience; and all Vietnamese people, educated and uneducated

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[16] See Saigoneer, "Teenagers Account for 70% of Vietnam's 'Secret Abortions,'" *Saigoneer.com* (July 2016), https://saigoneer.com/saigon-health/7365-teenagers-account-for-70-of-vietnam-s-secret-abortions.

[17] In 2003, the Minister of Health published the National Standards and Guidelines (NSGs) for Reproductive Health Services including a chapter on Safe Abortion.

[18] See Saigoneer, "Vietnam's Abortion Dilemma," *Saigoneer.com* (January 2016), https://saigoneer.com/saigon-health/6146-vietnam-s-abortion-dilemma

[19] See Peter Phan, *Vietnamese–American Catholics* (New York: Paulist Press, 2005), 24.

alike, can relate, understand, and participate in it. The cultural values of the Vietnamese tradition are conveyed by narratives that are very familiar to each member of this community. Therefore, there are not many clues showing that there is a difference in the moral status of the fetus at different stages of the pregnancy in Vietnam. In the Western tradition, we know that there are a variety of opinions depending on the perspective of culture and religion. For example, differing opinions occur in Christianity, in the Islamic tradition, and in Judaism.

How do the Vietnamese think about the moral status of the embryo? Although we cannot trace back philosophical and theological works to articulate the Vietnamese worldview on the moral status of the embryo in the Vietnamese tradition, a potentially important anthropological contribution to ethical reflection lies in the investigation of the social processes through which moral norms are culturally and historically shaped. As Barry Hoffmaster puts it, "What needs to be understood is how morality is woven into the experiences and the lives it helps to constitute."[20] We hope that by critically reflecting on Vietnamese customs and traditions, a framework of understanding and evaluation of the ethics regarding embryos will emerge.

First, in both Buddhism and Vietnamese culture there is a fundamental respect for living beings, especially human beings. According to these traditions, human life is a mystery. Therefore, in destroying human life a person acts against Heaven and Earth.[21] The Vietnamese traditional culture condemns the woman who attempts to terminate an unwanted pregnancy because that is "an immoral action that is prohibited by custom and law, in the past and now

[20] Barry Hoffmaster, "Can Ethnography Save the Life of Medical Ethics?" *Social Science and Medicine* 35 (1992), 1426.

[21] See Nguyen Trai Toan Tap, *The Complete Collection of Nguyen Trai's Writings: Book One*, Liên Quốc Mai, Khuê Nguyễn, Hoặc Thu Kiều, collectors and translators (Ho Chi Minh City: Center of National Studies and literature Publishers, 1998), 655.

also."[22] In Quoc Trieu Hinh Luật: Hình Luật Triều Lê" (Criminal Code of the Le Dynasty), a pregnant female culprit who was sentenced to death penalty would be permitted to live until giving birth and the death penalty would be delayed 100 days after giving birth (Article 23).[23] Therefore, it is evident that the life of the unborn child was treasured and protected by law. Further, the Vietnamese tradition holds that children are a precious treasure of the family. A family with many children is a sign of blessing from heaven, and infertility is not blessed.[24]

Second, the Vietnamese understanding of the human embryo is expressed in a custom that has been practiced and rooted in traditional Vietnamese education. It is an old custom that that children should be educated by their parents from intrauterine life. The Vietnamese strongly believe that the attitudes and emotions of the parents during pregnancy could have an educational effect on the embryo and the fetus. In the time of pregnancy, parents often express their love and care for their child. When a woman becomes pregnant, the elders in the family advise her that she should pay attention more carefully to her behavior, that is to say, she should try to be meek, kind-minded, and avoid bad behaviors.[25] By doing so, the parents expect their child to experience their love and parental caring, which in turn produces a good environment in which a child may grow. This custom thus expresses the parents' respect for the embryo and the fetus; indeed, in a certain way, it reveals a Vietnamese belief that both the embryo and the fetus are a human being.

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[22] Toan Ánh, *Nếp Cũ – Con Người Việt Nam, Phong Tục Cổ Truyền* [Old Habits - Vietnamese People and Customs] (Ho Chi Minh City: Ho Chi Minh City Publisher, 1992), 35.
[23] See Nguyễn Sĩ Giác, Vũ Văn Mầu, "Quoc Trieu Hinh Luật: Hình Luật Triều Lê," [Criminal Code of the Le Dynasty,] translated and transcribed by Lương Thần and Cao Nải Quang (Sài Gòn: Nguyễn Văn Của, Publisher, 1965), 271.
[24] *Blessing* is an important word in Vietnamese tradition. The Vietnamese people believe that when parents do good things, their children will receive good blessings as a result of their parents' deeds.
[25] See Toan Ánh, *Nếp Cũ – Con Người Việt Nam, Phong Tục Cổ Truyền*, 38.

Third, respect for the human embryo and the fetus is expressed both in the traditional way of proceeding in expressing love and concern in the event of a miscarriage and also in the custom of praying for the dead embryo and fetus. In the case of miscarriage, the mother collects the "clot" and buries it. If they are Catholics, the parents continue to remember their unborn child in their prayer; if they are Buddhists or unbelievers,[26] they usually go to a Buddhist temple to pray for their child. By doing so, the Buddhists hope that their child can be saved and may be reincarnated. Moreover, the woman usually counts her miscarried fetus among her children and she cites the age of the gestation as the age of this dead child. Indeed, the Vietnamese, like some other Asian people, count the age of the child not based on the day of birth, but from the day of conception.

Finally, the research of Gammeltoft shows that while most interviewees were convinced that abortion was a necessary choice given the current circumstances of their lives, they also saw the procedure as very morally problematic.[27] In contrast to Western Europe and the United States, in Vietnam there are no public debates on the ethical aspects of abortion. Conscious of this fact, Gammeltoft has done in-depth interviews with twenty-five young women and ten young men living in the Hanoi area. From these interviews, the author concluded that very few of the young men and women seemed to take abortion lightly, and the statement that "abortion is a sin" was repeated throughout the interviews. Many interviewed women felt the remorse of sinfulness in emotional, psychological, ethical, or religious ways because they knew that they did something wrong. The author of the interviews contends that there were two different views of the embryo and the fetus that co-existed among many young

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[26] It is said that Buddhism is the most popular religion in Vietnam, but in reality, many Vietnamese people do not understand and practice their beliefs; they simply go to a Buddhist temple to pray, and although there are a number of people who claim that they are atheists, in reality, many of them also go to the temple and pray.

[27] See Tine Gammeltoft, "Between 'Science' and 'Superstition': Moral Perceptions of Induced Abortion Among Young Adults in Vietnam," *Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry* 26 (2001), 321.

people. From a scientific view, the fetus was seen as belonging to the domain of nature, and an early abortion is, therefore, a morally neutral act. In the "social-spiritual" view, the embryo and fetus are a cultural being, and abortion at any stage of gestation is consequently a sin. In both views, late-term abortions are considered morally wrong.[28] While some emphasized that in early pregnancy an embryo or a fetus is "nothing yet," nearly all the young women and men simultaneously insisted that abortion at any stage of gestation is a sin.[29]

In summary, the Vietnamese people seem to assume that an embryo is a human person from conception. That is to say, respect and reverence are due to the embryo from the beginning of life. Both the human embryo and fetus are regarded as human beings. This point of view is expressed through the cult, morality, and activity of Vietnamese daily life.

2. In light of the teaching of the Catholic Church

a. Theological and moral status of the human embryo and fetus: a review of the Catholic tradition and Magisterium in recent Vatican documents

The protection of human life is one of the most important missions of the Catholic Church. In the course of her history, the Catholic Church has unceasingly engaged in the battle to protect the dignity of the human fetus. Traditionally, arguments of the Catholic Church based on her long tradition are rooted in Scripture, tradition, natural law, and a new understanding of science. In this thesis, I limit myself to present the teaching of the Catholic Church on the prohibition of abortion presented in recent Vatican documents, especially: The *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (1974) and *Evangelium Vitae* (1995).

The absolute prohibition of abortion in the teaching of the Catholic church is based on two main principles: the sacredness of the human being and the understanding that the embryo

[28] See ibid., 322.
[29] See ibid., 325.

is a human being from the moment of conception. In the *Declaration on Procured Abortion* we read: "The tradition of the Church has always held that human life must be protected and favored from the beginning, just as at the various stages of its development."[30] The *Declaration* puts it clearly that, "from the time that the ovum is fertilized, a life is begun which is neither that of the father nor of the mother, it is rather the life of a new human being with his own growth. It would never be made human if it were not human already."[31] In other words, the life at the beginning of conception is an autonomous individual who possesses dignity, independent from the father and the mother. This document strongly affirms that even if "a doubt existed concerning whether the fruit of conception is already a human person, it is objectively a grave sin to dare to risk murder."[32] The first right of the human person is life.[33]

In *Evangelium Vitae*, John Paul II employs a traditional principle against direct killing of the innocent. As he clearly claims: "I confirm that the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral."[34] It is important to note that here the Pope wants to apply this principle to all abortions: "procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing,[35] by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth."[36] For the Pope, the embryo and the fetus are always an innocent human being; therefore, to have a direct abortion is direct killing and it is

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[30] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Procured Abortion* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1974), 6.
[31] Ibid., 12.
[32] Ibid., 13.
[33] See ibid., 11.
[34] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 57.
[35] The direct/indirect distinction has faced extensive criticism as an inadequate formulation of the Church's theological tradition. Bernard Häring maintains that the question of what is direct and what is indirect abortion is not settled in Catholic moral theology. He contends that the distinction between 'direct' and 'indirect' abortion sometimes results in too literal or mechanical applications. See Bernard Häring, "A Theological Evaluation," in *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, ed. John T. Noonan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 136.
[36] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 58.

always gravely immoral. This principle is absolute, and so there are no reasons that may justify or change the moral nature of this human action. As the Pope puts it clearly, "these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being."[37]

John Paul II discusses the argument that allows abortion for the first days after conception because the result of conception cannot yet be considered a personal human life.[38] Responding to this argument, the Pope contends that genetic science demonstrates this life is human from the time of fertilization. He puts it clearly that "the results themselves of scientific research on the human embryo provide 'a valuable indication'[39] for discerning by the use of reason a personal presence at the moment of the first appearance of a human life: how could a human individual not be a human person?'"[40] This argument is cited from number 78 of the Instruction on Respect for Human Life, *Donum Vitae*. The question indicates a tutiorist approach, to address a complex ethical question without the ability of moral certainty. Even in Roman Catholicism, there are theologians who cast doubt upon the personhood of the embryo during the early days of pregnancy. However, while acknowledging the lack of certainty about the beginning of personhood, the Catholic Magisterium has held that the human embryo must be treated as a person from the moment of conception.[41]

Some may argue that there is no doubt that human embryos and fetuses are human. The issue is, rather, what moral status they have in the early stages of development. For a Catholic, because a human embryo is human, the embryo has the same dignity that any person holds.

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[37] Ibid., no. 58.
[38] See ibid., no. 60.
[39] Ibid.
[40] Ibid.
[41] See Bernard Hoose, *Received Wisdom?: Reviewing the Role of Tradition in Christian Ethics* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 97.

Clearly, one of the most fundamental human rights is the right to live. This respect for moral dignity is derived from the understanding of the human soul. God creates a new soul and imparts it to the new human being; it follows that the presence of the soul[42] establishes dignity; therefore, dignity prevents any action that violates or destroys the vitality of a developing human being. In sum, according to the official teaching of the Catholic Church, a new human being starts from the time that the ovum is fertilized and possesses the dignity of human beings that need to be protected; therefore, the direct and voluntary killing of an innocent human being is always gravely immoral.

b. A critical and ethical evaluation of menstrual regulation in Vietnam

Although derived from different sources, the attitudes toward embryos and fetuses in the Vietnamese tradition and in Roman Catholic teaching reach almost the same point of view. As presented above, the Vietnamese tradition and culture hold that the embryo is a human being at the first moment of conception. This view is confirmed by the teaching of the Catholic Church. In order for this encounter to be fruitful for both parties we need, first of all, to raise a question: what can Catholic teaching offer to the Vietnamese people who are not predominantly Catholic? I firmly believe that what the Church addresses to Catholics, she must also address to those who are not Catholic. Indeed, the Gospel of life "has a profound and

[42] The question on the moment of implantation of the soul has been discussed a lot among Catholic thinkers. Joseph F. Donceel argues that although nowadays many Catholic thinkers take for granted that from the start, the fertilized ovum possesses a spiritual soul. This opinion has not always been the majority opinion in the Church. He maintains that Anselm, Thomas Aquinas, and many of the great Scholastic thinkers held that the human soul was not infused at the moment of conception, but at some time between conception and birth. See Joseph F. Donceel, "Immediate Animation and Delayed Hominization," *Theological Studies* 31, no. 1 (1970): 76-105. On the contrary, Shannon and Wolter argue that recent scientific discoveries fit in more admirably with the epigenetic conception of how a human being originates at the moment of fertilization as coincident with the time of animation. They claim that the most recent scientific evidence concerning fertilization and the development of the early human embryo does even more to reinforce their view that any theory of immediate animation seems to have become as untenable today as it was commonly held to be for centuries by Catholic thinkers. See Thomas A. Shannon and Allan B. Wolter, "Reflections on the Moral Status of the Pre-embryo," *Theological Studies* 51, no. 4 (1990): 603-624.

persuasive echo in the heart of every person, believer and non-believer alike, because it marvelously fulfils all the heart's expectations while infinitely surpassing them."[43] The content of the Gospel is defined in theological, not philosophical or scientific terms. Scripture and tradition provide moral principles while the natural law provides reasons for the Pope to urge all persons to follow these principles.[44] From that point of view, I think that Catholic teaching should shed a light on the situation of the high rate of abortions that the Vietnamese society and the Church are faced with.

As presented above, it is supported by the Vietnamese tradition and culture that abortion is morally wrong. It is in order to hide the true nature of abortion and to attenuate its seriousness in public opinion, or to avoid fostering an uneasiness of conscience,[45] that people in Vietnam tend to use ambiguous terminology, such as "interruption of pregnancy" or menstrual regulation. As John Paul II stresses "no word has the power to change the reality of things: procured abortion is the deliberate and direct killing, by whatever means it is carried out, of a human being in the initial phase of his or her existence, extending from conception to birth."[46] As Callahan puts it: "abortion is not just an 'emptying of the uterine contents.' It is also an act of killing; there will be no abortion unless the conceptus is killed."[47]

From the analysis of the sensitive situation in Vietnam as presented above, one may argue that, in some cases, those who have an abortion in the first week of pregnancy can morally justify it because there are tragic and painful conditions for the mother, who might

[43] John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 2.
[44] See Leslie C. Griffin, "Evangelium Vitae: The Law of Abortion," in *John Paul II and Moral Theology*, eds. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick, Readings in Moral Theology No. 10 (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 96.
[45] See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 58.
[46] Ibid., no. 58.
[47] Daniel Callahan, "Abortion Decisions: Personal Morality," in *Bioethics: Principles, Issues, and Cases,* ed. L. Vaughn (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 308.

be–for example–an unmarried student. Sometimes the motivation that leads to that decision is fear that the child to be born would live in such conditions that it would be better if the birth did not take place. In other words, are there some circumstances in which an abortion can be justified? Responding to this argument, Pope John Paul II affirms that these reasons and others like them, however serious and tragic, can never justify the deliberate killing of an innocent human being.[48] In short, a direct abortion is grave and morally wrong because it is the deliberate and direct killing of human life.

Finally, traditionally, the moral theology of the Catholic Church on abortion used to focus on the personal responsibility of those who commit this immoral act. Based on an individualistic and act-oriented approach, it seems to me that the Catholic Church has partly neglected a social understanding of sin and failed to address social issues and unjust structures. It is evident from our discussion that unjust policy and the lack of understanding of moral choice could lead many people to act against what their consciences tell them. Therefore, by affirming the immorality of abortion, the situation in Vietnam calls us to reflect more profoundly on how unjust social and cultural structures impact negatively on moral choices and on the development of an individual in society. In this context, I think that insights from the theology of social sin of the Catholic Church would help us articulate on the one hand, what is happening; and, on the other hand, the contextual analysis might enrich the understanding of social sin in the tradition of Catholic theology.

This thesis points out that an emphasis on the social dimension of sin is important and necessary in the Vietnamese context and that such an emphasis does not mitigate the personal dimension of sin but rather calls all members of the society to be aware of sinful situations for which they are partly responsible. However, in order to attain this goal, it is important first to

[48] See John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, no. 58.

articulate the concept of conscience and its role in moral theology. Indeed, despite being different from what is presented in the Catholic tradition, conscience plays a vital role in the ethical system and life in the Vietnamese tradition. As indicated above, many Vietnamese people feel the remorse of sinfulness when they have an abortion because they know that they did something against their conscience. Hence, in the next section, by explaining the concept of conscience and erroneous conscience, the thesis attempts to answer the questions: What does one should do to act in accordance with one's conscience? How does a woman feel when she decides to act against what her conscience says that she should not do? And, due to negative impacts from society, if one does not know that abortion is an immoral act, to what extent people can be responsible for their acts?

3. Conscience and moral responsibility

a. A brief overview of conscience and its role in moral theology

As mentioned above, the Gospel of life echoes in the heart of every person, believer and non-believer alike. Catholic theology confirms that all human beings are called to do good and avoid evil by virtue of the voice of their conscience. Conscience plays an important role in the history of philosophical and theological reflection. The nature of conscience has been discussed from antiquity and reinforced through the ages. Vatican Council II opened a new age for conscience by describing conscience as the person's "most secret core, and their sanctuary," and affirming that "in the depths of his conscience, man detects a law which he does not impose upon himself, but which holds him to obedience."[49] O'Malley calls "conscience" the most "impressive among interiority words" used at the Council.[50] Under the influence of Vatican

[49] Vatican Council II, *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World Gaudium et Spes* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 16.
[50] John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 48-52, at 50.

Council II, and in the spirit of the renewal of moral theology, the stress is on the "primacy of conscience." To emphasize the role of conscience, the Second Vatican Council helps the Church open her heart to the world. David DeCosse contends that the concept of conscience plays a vital role in helping the Church open herself to dialogue with the modern world. He affirms that "*Gaudium es spes* drew on the concept of conscience as one way to establish the basis for the theme of the document: the dialogue between the church and the modern world."[51]

What does conscience mean? In the classical world, the Greek word *syneidesis* means "knowing with." The term was translated in Latin as *conscientia*, and from that comes the English word "conscience," which has two meanings. The first is "consciousness, knowledge of oneself," especially "consciousness of right and wrong." The second is "a joint knowledge with some other person, being privy to."[52] The moral tradition of the Catholic Church holds that the conscience is at the heart of moral life and, through conscience, a person can perceive the will of God. In *Dignitatis humanae*, Pope Paul VI affirms that "on his part, man perceives and acknowledges the imperatives of the divine law through the mediation of conscience."[53] By listening and acting in accordance with the call of conscience, a person is responsible for his moral acts before God. Indeed, Keenan contends that "conscience is the source of all moral obligations: there we are each called by God to love and to develop ourselves so as to know what constitutes right living."[54] Therefore, if our consciences are well formed, we are able to make good moral decisions. Unfortunately, as presented above, our case study points out that

[51] David DeCosse, "The Primacy of Conscience, Vatican II, and Pope Francis: The Opportunity to Renew a Tradition," in Paul G. Crowley, ed., *From Vatican II to Pope Francis: Charting a Catholic Future* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), 158.
[52] Linda Hogan, "Conscience in the Documents of Vatican II," in *Conscience,* Readings in Moral Theology No. 14, ed. Charles Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004), 86.
[53] Vatican Council II, *Declaration on Religious Freedom Dignitatis Humanae* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1965), no. 4.
[54] James Keenan, S.J., "Josef Fuchs at Eighty: Defending Conscience from Rome," *Theology Digest* 42, no. 2 (1995), 138.

there are external and internal factors that might make one's conscience err. In these cases, we wonder to what extent people are responsible for their acts and how to help people have a good, formed conscience. The understanding of erroneous conscience in the tradition of moral theology of the Catholic Church might shed light on this problem.

b. Erroneous conscience

b.1. What is an erroneous conscience?

The concept of erroneous conscience has been discussed in the long history of the Catholic moral tradition. In his study, James Keenan has found in the writing of Thomas Slater, a Jesuit theologian, a list of obstacles that conscience faces regarding ignorance, concupiscence, fear, and violence. Through this list, Keenan suggests that though the manualists were known mainly as physicians of souls, they became the psychiatric caregivers of the inculpable sinners.[55] Keenan also points out that Henry Davis gave a long list of categorically problematic consciences: the false, doubting, perplexed, scrupulous, and lax consciences. He concludes that this understanding of conscience allows us to see how easily and frequently the average Catholic deviates from the true conscience.[56]

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that, "faced with a moral choice, conscience can make either a right judgment in accordance with reason and the divine law or, on the contrary, an erroneous judgment that departs from them" (no. 1799). The *Catechism* also affirms that it is not true that, in every case, one is excused from guilt when one acts according to one's erroneous conscience. Moreover, the *Catechism* holds that "conscience can remain in ignorance or make erroneous judgments. Such ignorance and errors are not always free of

[55] See James Keenan, "Vatican II and Theological Ethics," *Theological Studies* 74, no. 1 (2013), 165.
[56] See ibid., 165.

guilt."[57] The documents of Vatican Council II and post-Council documents speak of conscience as the voice of God echoing in the depths of the person. However, they also teach that conscience can be in error. This error can be because of ignorance, carelessness, or bad habits. *Gaudium et spes* maintains that "conscience frequently errs from invincible ignorance without losing its dignity" (GS, no. 16).

b.2. How can conscience be erroneous?

It is noteworthy that, on the one hand, *Gaudium et spes* 16 presents that "conscience is the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, Whose voice echoes in his depths." On the other hand, it says that conscience can be in error. Here, a question may be raised: if conscience is the most secret core of a person, how can a conscience be in error? According to Hogan, Cardinal Ratzinger points to a contradiction here when he wonders "how conscience can err if God's call is directly to be heard in it, is unexplained."[58]

In order to respond to this question, it is important to articulate the understanding within the Catholic tradition of two aspects of conscience. According to the Catholic moral tradition, one's conscience includes two aspects: innate and acquired. As a human being, each person is granted a potential capacity to make a good judgment. We can say this capacity is shared by all human beings. In order to make a good moral judgment, one has to learn how to make good moral decisions at different stages in one's life. In this journey of moral development, one's conscience can be in error for a variety of reasons. In other words, being rooted in the innate nature of the conscience, the judgment of one's conscience can err because the formation of

[57] *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed. (Vatican City and Washington, DC: Libreria Editrice Vaticana; distributed by United States Catholic Conference, 2000), no. 1801.
[58] Hogan, "Conscience in the Documents of Vatican II," 85.

conscience is a process acquired by the individual. This also implies that external factors play an important role in the good formation of one's conscience.

For Ratzinger, divine revelation and Christian community are good supports for one's process of conscience formation. Ratzinger makes a distinction between an ontological level and a level of judgment. As we know, the medieval Scholastic tradition distinguished between two levels of conscience: *synderesis* and *conscientia*. Ratzinger explains that, though the word *synderesis* came into the medieval tradition to be identified with conscience, it "remained unclear in its exact meaning and for this reason became a hindrance to a careful development of this essential aspect of the whole question of conscience."[59] For that reason, he suggests that *synderesis* can be better expressed by *anamnesis*, a Platonic category, that today we might call "memory of the origin." *Anamnesis*, the Platonic "memory," does not impose moral authority externally, but draws out what is "written on our hearts" through conscience.[60] He suggests that the *anamnesis* is something like "an original memory of the good and true… has been implanted in us, that there is an inner ontological tendency within man, who is created in the likeness of God, toward the divine."[61] Ratzinger maintains that because *anamnesis* belongs to the deepest and most profound part of a human being, it "imposes nothing foreign, but brings to fruition what is proper to *anamnesis*, namely, its interior openness to the truth."[62] According to Ratzinger, the fault of an erroneous conscience consists in the neglect of one's being. He clearly affirms that "the guilt lies then in a different place, much deeper – not in the present act, not in the present judgment of conscience, but in the neglect of my being which made me deaf to the internal promptings of truth."[63] It is clear that Ratzinger refers to the foundation of

[59] Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Conscience and Truth," in *Crisis of Conscience,* ed. John Haas (New York: Crossroad Publisher, 1996), 12.
[60] Ibid., 14.
[61] Ibid., 13.
[62] Ibid., 14.
[63] Ibid., 16.

moral conscience that is a capacity and a tendency to openness to the truth through a constant dialogue with God in the deepest part of human beings. For Ratzinger, the central moral issue is the avoidance of the question of truth. An erroneous conscience is self-justifying only in a world in which truth has been shunted to the side.[64] Ratzinger clearly points out that "the erroneous conscience which makes life easier and marks a more human course, would then be the real grace, the normal way to salvation."[65] He adds that, unfortunately, people would be more at home in the dark than in the light. For this reason, it is important to return to the roots of the Christian tradition and message to address the cases of erroneous conscience that are voluntary, either through a failure to bother to learn to discern wrong action or through continuous wrong action.

The claim of Ratzinger is echoed in the definition of conscience presented in a recent textbook of moral theology in which Connors and McCormick present the full meaning of conscience as "not just the ability to make decisions about ethical questions confronting us in the present moment,"[66] but rather conscience is

> A deep and abiding hunger within us to move beyond ourselves, a moral appetite constantly urging us on beyond all our limits and boundaries, calling us to stretch ourselves beyond our selfish and petty concerns, reaching out for others, for the moral good and ultimately for God.[67]

From the spiritual perspective, interestingly Kenneth Himes suggests that "sloth as moral apathy is what hinders a person from pursuing that which is good."[68] Sloth is a refusal to seek

[64] See Peter Casarella, "Culture and Conscience in the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI," in *Explorations in the Theology of Benedict XVI,* ed. John C. Cavadini (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2012), 65.
[65] Ratzinger, "Conscience and Truth," 3.
[66] Russell B. Connors and Patrick T. McCormick, *Character, Choices and Community: The Three Faces of Christian Ethics* (New York: Paulist Press, 1998), 137.
[67] Ibid.
[68] Kenneth Himes, "The Formation of Coscience: The Sin of Sloth and the Significance of Spirituality," in *Spirituality and Moral Theology: Essays from a Pastoral Perspective,* ed. James Keating (New York: Paulist Press, 2000), 64.

the good because it is difficult and demanding. To hear the call of conscience is to be aware of the divine invitation to become more fully and authentically human. Sloth permits the voice of conscience to be muted so that the moral quest for goodness ceases.[69] If one does not desire to find the truth, if one is without passion for the truth and the good, it becomes evident that one cannot listen to and realize the voice of conscience among many other voices.

The insight of Ratzinger about conscience sheds light on the situation in Vietnam. It is clear that the law of God can be found in every culture, and if a human being earnestly and honestly listens to her conscience, she can discover an internal voice that tells her what she should do and what she must avoid. However, without the light of divine revelation and the gifts of God's Spirit, it is difficult, if not impossible, for human beings to realize and live out the commands of the law of God. Indeed, as presented above, the Vietnamese cultural and traditional values partly permit one to realize that abortion is an immoral act; and, therefore if one honestly pays attention to one's "heart" and opens oneself to the truth, she comes to know that her acts must be guided by a law written in her heart and must avoid immoral action. However, it is not easy to fulfill this mission. Indeed, under so many negative impacts from society and the existential environment, many people could not and do not want to acknowledge the truth that still partly echoes in their own heart. In this context, according to Ratzinger's theology, Christian revelation may play an important role in awakening the transcendent dimension of human being that is partly neglected. Christian revelation does not promise to liberate one's conscience from a sense of guilt. It is evident that the feeling of guilt might be both positively and negatively[70] interpreted by a variety of perspectives, for example

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[69] See ibid., 65.

[70] For example, Sigmund Freud, the founder of psychoanalysis, explains the feeling of guilt as the result of a struggle between the ego and the superego. Discussing the contribution of psychology for the understanding of conscience, Gula clearly distinguishes between the ego and superego. See Richard M Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith: Foundations of Christian Morality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 123-128.

cognitive, psychological, and religious perspectives. From a Christian point of view, we can say that, the feeling of guilt might be a result of an encounter between one's conscience and the Christian message; through this encounter, a person is called to acknowledge oneself and repent. This journey is not easy, but it is important and indispensable.

However, this account is not a total or satisfactory explanation of the situation in Vietnam. Indeed, experience tells us that there are many people whose conscience becomes hardened because of the habit of sinning. The moral tradition of the Catholic Church teaches that sins can make one's conscience err. In the same line, *Gaudium et spes* reaffirms that sins or bad habits can become barriers by which one cannot follow the call of conscience. Vatican II speaks of conscience which "by degrees grows practically sightless" as a result of a practice of sinning (GS, 16). In this state, error virtually defies correcting because the individual is not open to recognizing his or her situation. Arising from persistence in sin, the condition is a guilty one, yet the person no longer feels guilty or hears the call to repent.[71]

In other words, the feeling of guilt may decrease and even disappear as a consequence of sinful habits. A person who decides to have an abortion, and who involves others, directly or indirectly,[72] in this decision, might experience a strong guilt. However, guilt might disappear. This is dangerous for one's process of moral development. When one no longer feels guilty and cannot be aware of one's own sinful situation, she cannot repent. According to Ratzinger, the capacity of a person to know one's guilt is very important for human life. By citing A. Görres, Ratzinger affirms that a "feeling of guilt, the capacity to recognize guilt,

[71] See Germain Grisez and Russell Shaw, "Conscience: Knowledge of Moral Truth," in *Conscience*. Readings in Moral Theology No. 14, ed. Charles E. Curran (New York: Paulist, 2004), 45.
[72] Indeed, this tragedy greatly affects the woman because she is the one who directly has to shoulder the burden of guilt of that immoral action.

belongs essentially to the spiritual make-up of man. This feeling of guilt disturbs the false calm of conscience and could be called conscience's complaint against my self-satisfied existence."[73]

Finally, it is important to refer to external conditions that limit and distort the freedom of conscience of a moral agent in some cases in Vietnamese society. The moral tradition has talked about external factors that can violate seriously the conscience of a person. These elements might belong to a culture or an existential environment where a person lives or they come from unjust structures that one sometimes does not even acknowledge. In Vietnamese society, as I will present more clearly in the next chapter, sexism, collectivist culture, unjust law, and consumerism are four structural and social elements that might limit or distort one's conscience when people make a moral decision. These external elements may create fear and pressure that violate one's conscience. Hence, although these elements do not eliminate totally a capacity to make a free decision of conscience, they somehow limit this capacity and hence are considered as mitigating factors of the moral responsibility of a moral agent.

b.3. How do I know my conscience is in error?

When we discuss erroneous conscience, a question should be raised: how do I know my conscience is in error? In other words, are there signs which help one to realize that her or his conscience is erroneous? It seems to me that this is important because, if one does not know one's conscience is in error how can they overcome it? Curran contends that "both the theory and experience of consequent conscience emphasize the remorse of conscience as a sign of an erroneous conscience."[74] He maintains that remorse is exactly the opposite of the joy and peace of a true conscience. One might argue that the feeling of joy and peace may be experienced by

[73] Ratzinger, "Conscience and Truth," 5.
[74] Charles E. Curran, "Conscience in the Light of the Catholic Moral Tratition," in *Conscience*, Readings in Moral Theology No. 14, ed. Charles E. Curran, (New York: Paulist, 2004), 18.

people whose conscience is in error because they cannot realize the fact that they are acting from an erroneous conscience.

Based on the anthropological theology of Lonergan, Curran argues that the self-transcending subject has a deep drive and thrust toward the truth. Therefore, as a human being, one is always searching for truth by asking pertinent questions. As long as there are unanswered questions, I still seek and do not feel fulfillment in my heart. By nature, the human being is given by God an inclination to the truth and the good. And human beings continually search for the truth by raising questions. Once one more or less attains answers to these questions, one feels happiness, joyfulness, and peace in one's heart. Curran holds that there are three possible situations in which one's conscience cannot obtain peace and joy: finitude, sinfulness, and the lack of eschatological fullness.[75]

c. Erroneous conscience and moral responsibility

The tradition of Catholic moral theology distinguishes between invincible ignorance and vincible ignorance. In *Veritatis Splendor,* Pope John Paul II describes an *invincible ignorance* as "an ignorance of which the subject is not aware and which he is unable to overcome by himself."[76] Therefore, it can be said that an act can be wrong, but the moral agent is not responsible for that act. In other words, in such a case, a mistake would not be a sin, since a sin must involve a deliberate choice of an evil, knowing the good. Bretzke argues that invincible error concerns mitigating factors which are so serious that the person most likely cannot see her own error and fault; hence, for the lack of such moral insight the person is not personally culpable.[77] One is mistaken, but one does not know it, and also there is nothing one could have

[75] See ibid., 19.
[76] John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor: On Some Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), no. 62.
[77] See James T. Bretzke, *Morally Complex World: Engaging Contemporary Moral Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 122.

done, or can do now, to prevent or correct the situation. In these circumstances, one should follow one's erroneous conscience, but there is no guilt in doing so.

There is also a blameworthy erroneous conscience. In this case, the ignorance is one's own fault. Faced with moral truth, we all tend to evade it or to self-deceive ourselves because, if we realized and acknowledged the truth clearly, it would make demands on us. In this situation, one is culpable because one has a vague awareness of the truth but consciously suppresses it. When one's conscience is in error like this following such a conscience we do not escape guilt. In other words, because our conscience errs, we are responsible for our erroneous acts.

In *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II argues that the evil done following a judgment of erroneous conscience remains an evil or disorder (VS, 63). The languague used here reminds us of Thomas Aquinas, who makes a distinction between *malum*, *peccatum*, and *culpa*. Based on this distinction, we can see that the act resulting from erroneous conscience remains a *malum* and a *peccatum*, but not a *culpa*. This means that an evil remains an evil but is not culpable.

Hogan contends that the Vatican II documents limited the discussion of the erroneous conscience only to the issue whether the error was caused by vincible or invincible ignorance. And she contends that there are elements in history that might help us to resolve this problem,[78] as James Keenan has argued. Indeed, James Keenan explains that, in the theology of Aquinas, one can find a clue for this important distinction. He proposes that we should think of rightness as being a judgment of reason, whereas goodness pertains to the heart.[79] Keenan states this distinction in the following way: "goodness measures whether out of love one strives to attain a rightly ordered self… Rightness on the other hand, measures whether one actually attains a

[78] See Hogan, "Conscience in the Documents of Vatican II," 85-86.
[79] See James Keenan, *Goodness and Rightness in Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologiae* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992), 143.

rightly ordered self."[80] One may cultivate a disposition that strives for moral goodness, in accord with the triple love command, and thereby strive for right action in line with that character, and still make erroneous judgments of conscience.

However, there are situations in which it is difficult or almost impossible to make a clear distinction between invincible ignorance and vincible ignorance. To what extent does one have to be reponsible for one's actions when one is not totally free from pressures from outside?

Bernard Häring argues that invincible ignorance should not be interpreted simply as a rational intellectualism, but rather we should consider invincible ignorance in a broader perspective. He contends that it is "a matter of a person to 'realize' a moral obligation. Because of the person's total experience, the psychological impasses, and the whole context of his life, he is unable to cope with a certain moral imperative. The intellectual difficulties of grasping the values behind a certain imperative are often deeply rooted in existential difficulties."[81] The insight of Häring helps us more easily to understand the situation in Vietnam. I suggest that, if we understand an invincible ignorance only in term of rational intellectualism, there are very few people whose erroneous consciences are listed in this category. This implies the fact that many cases of erroneous consciences are vincible and a moral agent who acts in accordance with one's conscience is culpable.

To address a cultural argument, Bretzke argues that, although culture has been with us since the dawn of human existence, our understanding of how each culture operates and what it involves is only now beginning to unfold. One of the reasons for this delayed attention to the role of culture in human morality is due to the understanding of the human person influenced by Greek philosophy that tended to focus on a conceptualization of "human nature." He argues

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[80] Ibid., 137.
[81] Bernard Häring, "A Theological Evaluation," in *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives*, ed. John T. Noonan, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 140.

that there have been many examples in the long history of Catholic moral theology to indicate that our understanding of moral values might be limited by the cultural and historical conditions in which we live. Using slavery as an example, he concludes that in the past the Church accepted slavery because, at least in part, this was due to the invincible ignorance of our culture at that time. He contends that "while ignorance may seem to be invincible, this is not absolutely the case for all times, as both individuals and whole societies can grow in moral wisdom."[82]

From a feminist perspective, Linda Hogan contends that insights from feminist theologians are particularly important in this regard because they have taught us a lot about how we attain moral knowledge, in particular about the role of contexts and communities in the mediation of value. What these theorists remind us is that our consciences are formed in the context of communities, within the currents of discursive traditions, and through our interactions with the world around us. This is important because this approach articulates a more comprehensive understanding of the nature of moral truth and how human beings come to discern that truth.[83] In a slightly different way, William Spohn rightly points out that conscience relies on the moral quality of the group to which we belong. He argues that recent research indicates that people identify with those values and principles that are supported by communities that matter to them.[84] Consciences are dulled when the young are not taught an adequate moral vocabulary and when moral debate is "dumbed down" into the vocabularies of self-interest and utilitarian advantage.[85] It is clear that, just as positive values from community

[82] Bretzke, *Morally Complex World,* 138.
[83] See Hogan, "Conscience in the Documents of Vatican II," 85.
[84] See William Spohn, "Conscience and Moral Development," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), 126.
[85] Ibid., 126.

positively help a person form her conscience, so negative values may have a negative impact on one's formation of conscience.

In summary, by examining in cultural and traditional values and by listening to the call of conscience, each person should know that abortion is an immoral act one should avoid. However, unfortunately these voices sometimes are partly neglected when a person forgets the transcendent dimension of the human being or when one's conscience is darkened and hardened by the worldly attachments, bad and sinful habits, or these voices are suppressed by external pressures from culture and society. The traditional distinction points out that one is not culpable if she acts according to her invincible ignorance. Unfortunately, much ignorance is vincible; hence, one must be responsible for her own immoral acts. Moreover, the new understanding of conscience reminds us that the process of one's formation of conscience might be impacted by values and principles that are found in cultures, communities, and existential environments where one lives and to which one belongs. This suggests that culture and society may create impediments that prevent individuals from living their lives in accordance with their consciences. Particularly in Vietnam, I contend that sexism, collectivist culture, unjust law, and consumerism might prevent a person from doing what their conscience dictates. Therefore, in the next chapter, by articulating the concept of social sin, this thesis attempts to name unjust cultural practices and evil structures which may impact negatively on one's conscience.

Chapter 2: SOCIAL SIN: CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF ABORTION IN VIETNAM

While focusing on a case, this chapter attempts to understand in what way social sin negatively impacts an individual's moral agency. This chapter first presents the understanding of social sin in both the theology of John Paul II and liberation theology and highlights how some structures cause evil. I argue that social sin, though not usually considered a personal sin, limits the freedom of choice of a moral agent and that sinful economic and political structures tend to create a culture of conformity and passivity. Finally, applying that to the case study, I contend that, in some ways, gender inequality, oppressive collective culture, and unjust laws all violate human dignity, limit and violate human freedom, and distort the capacity of a moral agent to make a good moral judgment.

1. Social sin in the teachings of the Catholic Church

a. The concept of social sin

In a recent article, Conor Kelly highlights both the importance and the difficulty of using the terms social sin and structural sin in contemporary discussion of social sin. He notes that "much ambiguity still surrounds the concept" and "the precise relationship between the categories of structural sin and social sin is often unclear, to the point that the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably."[86] He asserts that "structural sin is a species of the larger genus of social sin, which refers more broadly to all types of social influences that induce individuals to sin."[87] Hormis Mynatty highlights that the ambiguity in the contemporary

[86] Conor M. Kelly, "The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin: Additional Insights from Theology and Moral Psychology," *Theological Studies* 80, no. 2 (June 2019), 294. For Kelly, "structure of sin" and "structural sin" can be interchangeably used because they typically appear as two linguistic formulations of the same idea.
[87] Ibid.

discussion on ‘social sin’ or ‘structural sin’ is most evident in the lack of a common understanding of this notion.[88]

In the official documents of the Catholic Church, John Paul II uses the two concepts in his writings without making a clear distinction among them. However, it is important to note that John Paul II uses the terms in an analogous sense because for him sin is the act of a person. Among other theologians, some similar but slightly different terminology has been developed and used, such as “sinful social structures” (Patrick Kerans), “structural violence” (Darlene Fozard Weaver), “structures of sin, structure of vice” (Daniel Daly).[89]

Mark O’Keefe notes that the term “social sin” could easily imply that social institutions themselves can commit sin. This would be clearly contrary to the traditional Catholic foundation of sin in human freedom and knowledge, which cannot be predicated regarding institutions.[90] By introducing the concept of ontic evil, Joseph MacKenna makes a great contribution that might respond to this challenge.[91] By this term, he means that social sin is not a sin as understood by the Catholic tradition about sin. Rather, social sin is a premoral or ontic evil. For example, when one holds that sexism is social sin, it means that it is an ontic evil. This implies that the culpability of this sin will be determined in view of the act-in-totality, which includes consideration of the surrounding circumstances and the motivation of the agent to know about and act upon structural evils. Similarly, Vidal argues that unjust structures can be called sinful structures because they have a sinful character.[92] In *The Acting Person and*

[88] See Hormis Mynatty, “The Concept of Social Sin,” *Louvain Studies* 16 (1991), 7.
[89] See Patrick. Kerans, *Sinful Social Structures,* (New York: Paulist Press, 1974); Darlene Fozard Weaver, *The Acting Person and Christian Moral Life* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011); Daniel J. Daly, “Structures of Virtue and Vice,” *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011).
[90] See Mark O’Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?* (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 31.
[91] See Joseph H. McKenna, “The Possibility of Social Sin,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 60, no. 2 (June 1994), 128-131.
[92] Vidal, “Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?” 197.

Christian Moral Life, Weaver makes a vital contribution when she highlights that "what the language of sin helps us to see is that the very conditions of our moral agency reason, freedom, desire are distorted by sin."[93]

Following O'Keefe, I contend that, to varying degrees, all these terms emphasize the fact that sin, even when social, exercises its influence on persons both externally and internally. Accordingly, the following analysis will use "social sin" as the term with the broadest connotation, though it will be used interchangeably with the terms sinful structures or unjust structures.[94]

b. The key elements of the Catholic ethics of social sin

What does social sin mean? Where does this theological term come from? Although the theology of social sin has been developed after Vatican Council II, especially under the pontificate of Pope John Paul II, the seed for a social analysis of sin was already present in Catholic social teaching and council documents and has been developed in the context of Latin American liberation theology. *Gaudium et spes* thus stresses the call for dialogue with the world and an examination of social, cultural, and political realities in the light of the gospel.[95] The treatment of the social dimensions of sin in *Gaudium et spes* represents an advance beyond that of *Sacrosanctum concilium* insofar as it attends to the role of social structures, but it does not contain an explicit invocation of the language of social sin. While the Council Fathers avoided mentioning social sin in the paragraph 109 of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, *Gaudium et spes* par. 25 affirms that humans "are often diverted from doing good and spurred toward evil by social circumstances in which they live and are immersed from their birth." And "when the

[93] Weaver, *The Acting Person and Christian Moral Life*, 115.
[94] See O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?,* 35.
[95] See Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 1 in Kristin E. Heyer, "'An Echo in their Hearts': The Church in Our Modern World," *New Theology Review* 28, no. 2 (2016), 29.

structure of affairs is flawed by the consequences of sin, man, already born with a bent toward evil, finds there new inducements to sin, which cannot be overcome without strenuous efforts and the assistance of grace."[96]

It is interesting to note that the account of social sin emerged in the context of a local church, namely, the Latin American church. At the second general conference in Medellín, the Latin American bishops introduced the language of social sin into magisterial teaching. Margaret Pfeil notes that "the Latin American bishops did not intend to undermine the importance of personal agency in formal sin, but they did want to draw a closer connection between human sinfulness and the pervasive webs of structural injustice enveloping their countries."[97] The Third General Conference of the Latin American Episcopate, held at Puebla, Mexico, in 1979, marked another significant development in the concept of social sin. Pfeil observes that "building on the pope's language, the bishops' final text speaks of 'situations of social sinfulness' and 'individual and social sinfulness.'"[98] The bishops observed that structural sin[99] profoundly influenced personal moral development. The bishops contend that "culture is continually shaped and reshaped by the ongoing life and historical experience of peoples; and it is transmitted by tradition from generation to generation."[100]

Pope John Paul II played an important role in incorporating the concept of social sin into the magisterial teaching of Catholic theology. At his homily at the closing of Puebla, the

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[96] Vatican Council II, *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 25.
[97] Margaret Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," *Louvain Studies* 27 (2002), 137.
[98] Ibid., 138.
[99] Conor M. Kelly rightly points out that the precise relationship between the categories of structural sin and social sin is often unclear, and the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. In his article, he suggests that "structural sin is a species of the larger genus of social sin, which refers more broadly to all types of social influences that induce individuals to sin." Kelly, "The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin: Additional Insights from Theology and Moral Psychology," 294.
[100] CELAM, "Third General Congress at Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, 1979," in *New Directions in Mission and Evangelization 1: Basic Statements 1974-1991*, eds. James A. Scherer and Stephen B. Bevans (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), par. 392.

pope referred to "sinful structures" for the first time. After that, he continued to develop this treatment in his 1983 Apostolic Exhortation, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* and then in the social encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (1987).[101]

In *Reconciliatio*, before presenting what social sin is, the pope confirmed that all sin is personal. He wanted to be sure that presenting the concept of social sin does not mitigate against the personal dimension or responsibility for sin. The pope held that a situation or structure, although it can be unjust, cannot in itself be a sin, since it lacks personal free will and, thus, moral agency.

In this document, three meanings of social sin emerge in the theology of Pope John Paul II. First, "by virtue of human solidarity which is as mysterious and intangible as it is real and concrete, each individual's sin in some way affects others" (no. 16). The pope contended that every personal sin affects others because "a soul that lowers itself through sin drags down with itself the church and, in some way, the whole world" (no. 16). Therefore, according to this first meaning of the term, "every sin can undoubtedly be considered as social sin" (no. 16).

Second, in the language of the Gospel, social sins are the sins that directly attack one's brother or sister. In this sense, social sin is sin against love of neighbor, and in the law of Christ it is all the more serious in that it involves the Second Great Commandment, which is "like unto the first" (no. 72).

The third meaning of social sin refers to the relationships among the various human communities. These relationships are not always in accord with the plan of God, who intends that there be justice in the world and freedom and peace among individuals, groups, and peoples. When he moves to the third dimension of social sin, the pope takes great pains to

[101] John Paul II, *On Social Concern - Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987).

emphasize personal accountability and the analogical nature of social sin, cautioning that even analogically sinful social phenomena "must not cause us to underestimate the responsibility of the individuals involved" (no. 16). For John Paul II, social sin remains fundamentally personal because a situation or an institution is not properly the subject of moral acts.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,* although John Paul gave more attention to structural realities, he yet again emphasized the individual dimension of sin. We find a definition of structures of sin as "the sum total of the negative factors working against a true awareness of the universal common good, and the need to further it, [which] gives the impression of creating, in persons and institutions, an obstacle which is difficult to overcome" (no. 36). It is interesting to note that, in this encyclical, we find a brief answer to the question of how structures and institutions can be called sinful. According to John Paul II, structures of sin "are rooted in personal sin, and thus always linked to the concrete acts of individuals who introduce these structures, consolidate them and make them difficult to remove" (no. 36). Baum remarks that, in a footnote, the text refers to *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* which demonstrated how social sins are related to personal sins.[102] Once again, the pope holds the individual morally accountable, while stressing the extensive social consequences of personal action. John Paul II's use of the language of social sin expresses his insistence on personal responsibility for sin.

The 1995 Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* marked John Paul's final significant development of the concept.

> It is at the heart of the moral conscience that the eclipse of the sense of God and of man, with all its various and deadly consequences for life, is taking place. It is a question, above all, of the individual conscience, as it stands before God in its singleness and uniqueness. But it is also a question, in a certain sense, of the "moral conscience" of society: in a way it too is responsible, not only because it tolerates or fosters behavior

[102] See Gregory Baum, "Structures of Sin," *The Logic of Solidarity*, ed. Gregory Baum & Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY, Orbis, 1989), 113.

> contrary to life, but also because it encourages the “culture of death”, creating and consolidating actual “structures of sin” which go against life.[103]

I cite this whole paragraph because this is the first time the pope applies the concept of moral conscience to society. It seems that the pope intends to ascribe moral responsibility to a non-moral agent. For Pope John Paul II, an unjust society is responsible because it fosters negative values and encourages the “culture of death.” As a moral agent, a society which freely created unjust structures that promote the “culture of death” has a kind of moral responsibility. In the text cited above, the pope does not explain to what extent social structures have a moral responsibility for moral evils that occur in society; however, his affirmation is important because the passage demonstrates that the pope is aware of the role of social structures in forming the consciences of individual moral agents. In other words, the formation of individual conscience is partly impacted by the conscience of society. By emphasizing the “culture of death,” the pope seems to suggest that unjust structures have the capacity to create unjust and evil outcomes and to profoundly impact the moral development of a moral agent.

From what is presented above, two critical conclusions can be drawn: first, in the case of social sin, John Paul II emphasizes a primarily personal understanding of sin and, secondly, the pope did not explain successfully how and in what way culture has an influence on moral agency.

As we noted above, Vatican II does not use the concept “social sin” lest the centrality of personal agency in formal sin be undermined. This concern of the Council’s Fathers is also shared by John Paul II. Although indeed he is the first pope to refer to and describe the concept of social sin, it is clear that for John Paul II, as John Langan puts it, “personal sin remains the fundamental category, and the notion of structures of sin is secondary and derivative both in

[103] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 24.

terms of our thinking about our situation and our actions to transform it."[104] This concern is understandable because the pope is afraid that so much emphasis on the social dimension of sin runs the risk of undermining individual moral responsibility.

Moreover, when the pope explains social sin, he asserts the moral truth that although a situation can be unjust, it cannot be considered to commit a sin by itself because it lacks personal free will. By emphasizing the personal dimension of sins, and by confirming that a situation or institution is not properly the subject of moral acts, the pope underestimates the importance of structural transformation. In my judgment, the pope is quite right when he stresses personal conversion because this is the core of the message of the Gospel.[105] However, this conversion needs to lead to social and structural transformation; and an emphasis on structural transformation leads Christians to realize their responsibility for evangelizing the environment which they inhabit.

The individualistic, act-oriented approach of traditional morality in theology led to a neglect of social justice. Based on the work of Peter Henriot, Heyer contends that "the Catholic moral tradition has neglected, if not resisted, a social understanding of sin due in part to an individualistic, act-oriented approach in traditional moral theology and a legalistic approach to questions of social justice."[106] Gregory Baum points out that, in comparison with the Medellín's teachings on social sin, John Paul's discussion of social sin remains less sensitive to the unconscious dimension of social sin and the impact unjust structures have on personal

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[104] John Langan, S.J., "Personal Responsibility and the Common Good in John Paul II," in *Ethics, Religion, and the Good Society: New Directions in a Pluralistic World*, ed. Joseph Runzo (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1992), 135.
[105] See Mt 4:17; Mc 1:15; and Lc 4,15.
[106] Kristin E. Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," *Theological Studies* 71, no. 2 (May 2010), 414; and Peter J. Henriot, "Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition," in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, eds. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Easton Whitehead (New York: Seabury, 1980), 132.

agency.[107] Therefore, the pope emphasizes the analogical nature of social sin because social structures cannot be subjects of moral decisions. Daniel K. Finn states that, in defense of the concept of social sin, José Ignacio González Faus has argued that rejecting social sin because there is not a single conscious person making the decision would require rejecting the notion of original sin for the same reason, an unthinkable option for Catholic theology.[108]

Second, we need to understand the reason why magisterial teaching discusses social sin. Margaret Pfeil rightly contends that "the aim… is not to explore the pastoral dimensions which gave rise to the language of social sin, but rather to circumscribe its use theologically."[109] Because of this, John Paul did not elaborate on how, and to what extent, unjust social structures affect individuals. Commenting on this document, Heyer contends that "whereas the document gives brief mention to the impact of social environments that turn people away from the good, on the whole its analysis of structural injustice and social sin remains weak."[110] Pfeil holds that "those who stressed the pastoral necessity of offering a stronger theological account of the social dimensions of sin seemed to speak from their own concrete experiences of structural sins."[111]

c. How do evil structures cause evil?

Peter Henriot points out that "properly functional social structures provide greater and better opportunities for human growth available to all groups in society. Unjust and

[107] See Gregory Baum, "Structures of Sin," in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical on Social Concern*, eds. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 113.
[108] See Daniel Finn, "What Is a Sinful Social Structure?" *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016), 138; and see José Ignacio González Faus, "Sin," in *Mysterium Liberations*: *Fundamental Concept of Liberation Theology,* eds. Ignancio Ellacuria and Jon Sobrino (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 532-42, at 537.
[109] Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," 141.
[110] Heyer, "'An Echo in their Hearts': The Church in Our Modern World," 35.
[111] Pfeil, "Doctrinal Implications of Magisterial Use of the Language of Social Sin," 138.

unresponsive social structures hinder this human growth and freedom, thereby oppressing human dignity."[112] Whereas social sin may not directly cause personal sin or a reversal of one's fundamental option, it "creates an environment in which it becomes more difficult to make good choices," heightening the tendency "present because of original sin to turn away from God."[113] According to Baum, unjust structures create in persons a blindness that prevents them from recognizing the evil dimension of their social reality. He adds that "sinful economic and political structures tend to create a culture of conformity and passivity."[114] Hence, as long as ignorance, nonrecognition, and ideological prisons hold sway, "there is no critical freedom and hence no personal sin in the strict sense."[115] In a slightly different way, Joseph H. McKenna suggests that the success of structural evil lies in the fact that structural evil entails a kind of "hiddenness." We tend to ignore its influence and even its presence because "over time and generations, evil has seeped into the recesses of society and culture."[116] If it is perceived at all, it is perceived as a "natural given."[117] It invites us to cooperate with it in ignorance, and it thrives on that ignorant cooperation.[118]

In addition, although each individual has personal freedom in exercising moral agency, the freedom of the individual person never exists in a vacuum. Indeed, while one's freedom is personal, it is always exercised and formed within the limits of the cultural, social, economic, and religious contexts which she inhabits. While human beings, as free agents, can determine and make a decision that overcomes the obstacles of social factors, this freedom is also limited,

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[112] Peter J. Henriot, "Social Sin: The Recovery of a Christian Tradition," in *Method in Ministry: Theological Reflection and Christian Ministry*, eds. James D. Whitehead and Evelyn Easton Whitehead (New York: Seabury, 1980), 130-131.
[113] Heyer, "Social Sin and Immigration: Good Fences Make Bad Neighbors," 419.
[114] Baum, "Structures of Sin," 113.
[115] Ibid., 114.
[116] McKenna, "The Possibility of Social Sin," 131.
[117] Ibid.
[118] See ibid.

structured, and even to a degree constituted by the social world in which the person lives. In other words, the freedom of a person can be distorted by social factors because freedom is itself social.[119]

Moreover, in exercising their moral agency, a person is partly influenced by the prevailing values of a culture. For example, in Vietnamese society today, influenced by consumerism, the prevailing values of the culture are wealth, success, and reputation while there is a tendency to dismiss more human values such as respect for human beings. On the other hand, a person can be largely blind to those values which are not embodied in one's culture and its institutions. It is partly through education that these values are imparted to citizens. John Paul II points out that "man … is also conditioned by the social structure in which he lives, by the education he has received and by his environment. These elements can either help or hinder his living in accordance with the truth."[120]

Finally, from a sociological perspective, many theologians and sociologists use theories of sociology to explain how social structures impact an individual. Utilizing the perspective of sociologists Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, Daniel Daly argues that "Berger's and Luckmann's theory of social and personal formation helpfully describes this complex relationship."[121] Daly suggests that Berger's argument can be summarized in two movements: "Externalization is the ongoing outpouring of human beings into the world… objectification is the attainment by the products of this activity of a reality that confronts its original producers as a facticity external to and other than themselves. Internalization is the re-appropriation by men of this same reality, transforming it once again from structures of the objective world into

[119] See Mark O'Keefe, "Social Sin and Fundamental Option," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (June 1992), 87.
[120] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus: Encyclical on the Hundredth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991), no. 38.
[121] Daniel J. Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice," *New Blackfriars* 92 (2011), 353.

structures of the subjective consciousness."[122] Through our habitual actions as a society, we "externalize" certain values and vices that then, as it were, take on a life of their own. Daly argues that although the free moral agent has the capacity to resist one's given cultural structures, and even to alter these structures through externalization, "the objectified structures of any society will continually exert influence and pressure on the agent."[123] He contends that social values become "objectified" or "institutionalized" in a way independent of the individuals who "created" them. In society, these structures then influence our decisions and actions – negatively if they are vicious structures or positively if they are virtuous structures. In short, unjust social structures or evil structures are continually shaped and re-shaped by the ongoing life and historical experience of peoples; they might be hidden and are an integral part of culture. However, they distort the freedom of an individual and they are transmitted by tradition from generation to generation through education and socialization.

d. Social sin and moral responsibility

How can anyone be held responsible for social sin? To what degree does a moral agent hold responsibility for what one does not know and is not free to do? These questions have been raised and discussed among contemporary theologians. To answer these questions is important. As McKenna highlights, social sin is a suspect theological category because in this concept, actual culpability can be difficult to recognize.[124]

First, one may argue that no one should be held responsible for evils that result from social and structural sins because structural injustices are beyond the choice, or, indeed, any action of individuals. Although it is true to say that persons constitute society, the structures of

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[122] Ibid.; see Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).
[123] Ibid., 354.
[124] See McKenna, "The Possibility of Social Sin," 125.

society "take on a history" of their own. People are born into societal structures which pre-exist them, and which continue without their conscious choosing.[125] In other words, through habits of thinking, attitudes of mind, traditions, cultural practices, laws, and institutions of society, these unjust structures embody the structural dimension of human behavior. Gradually, these structures attain a status of quasi-autonomy and produce evil without the conscious participation of the individuals.

Second, from a traditional moral perspective, one can argue that the responsibility of a moral individual may mitigate or even diminish due to the hiddenness of and blindness to social sins. Indeed, sin is an interior, intentional consent to a known evil. Therefore, people cannot be held morally responsible if they do not know the wrongness of their actions or are not free to do otherwise. In traditional terms, Mark O'Keefe rightly points out that, "if one were knowingly and willingly to support and enhance an unjust structure or situation, one would somehow be responsible for the injustice which results."[126] However, in reality, it is difficult for the moral agent to have either full knowledge of the evil she or he commits or full consent to the act. As we discussed earlier, the nature of structural evil entails a kind of hiddenness and blindness, and these evils have seeped into other social realities such as cultures, customs, traditions, and even languages.

Responding to the first argument, it can be said that, although individuals are not responsible for the existence of the socially unjust structures, they are, at least in part, accountable for them, because these structures continue to exist precisely when "the individuals deliberately choose to seek their own advantage at the expense of others, or by acting with complicity or indifference in the face of evil."[127] In other words, although individuals can be

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[125] O'Keefe, *What Are They Saying about Social Sin?*, 50.
[126] Ibid., 69.
[127] Ibid., 29.

affected by these unjust structures, on the other hand, they maintain and perpetuate them. For this reason, many theologians, for instance Kelly, insist that structures of sin still have personal moral agents in the background.[128] Similarly, Mynatty contends that "an institution or social structure never exists in and of itself, independently of the individuals composing it."[129] In a slightly different way, John Paul II, in "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the 'Theology of Liberation,'" strongly affirms that structures are consequences of human actions. He writes: "structures, whether they are good or bad, are the result of man's actions and so are consequences more than causes."[130] Moreover, structural evils are stable and difficult to change because structural evils also are usually protected by those who want to preserve their own privileges and positions. To put it another way, individual sins "strengthen those forms of social sin, which are actually the fruit of an accumulation of many personal sins."[131] Finally, since we participate in the process of creating society, we share in the responsibility for causing social sin. Therefore, it can be said that, though the existence of structures is not the responsibility of individuals, yet each person holds partial responsibility for them when they maintain and perpetuate them.

Regarding the latter argument, it is clear that ignorance should not be used too quickly to excuse a person from all moral responsibility and culpability. First, it is true that social sin entails a hiddenness that prevents a moral agent from knowing, it is also important to note that the blindness is never absolute and final as long as moral freedom and responsibility can be awakened.[132] In discussing sinful social structures, by using the metaphor of "darkness" for sin, Kerans highlights that blindness usually is a result of an active choice of the moral agent.

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[128] See Kelly, "The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin," 297.
[129] Mynatty, "The Concept of Social Sin," 14.
[130] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation'" (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1984), 15.
[131] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, no. 16.
[132] See ibid., 51.

He contends that "within that darkness, it has some meaning to say that we as communities have knowingly remained ignorant, we have cherished illusions."[133]

Moreover, it is not true that no kind of ignorance can be culpable. Should I be motivated to know about structural evils? Following Catholic moral tradition, Rubio argues that some kinds of ignorance can be culpable because "we are responsible for knowing about injustice in the world, if not for knowing everything."[134] Indeed, according to Aquinas we are under an obligation to know those things "without the knowledge of which we are unable to accomplish a due act rightly."[135] On the other hand, we are not bound to know specific, technical information. Therefore, ignorance that entails neglect of what one is bound to know is a sin of omission.[136] Social sin becomes possible when ignorance is a factor insofar as ignorance is voluntary and therefore culpable.

To explain more clearly how one participates in social sins, Rubio provides an approach that helps us to recognize the structural nature of the problem. In Rubio's account, social forms are sinful insofar as they stand in opposition to the Kingdom of God. Drawing on the category of cooperation with evil from the Catholic manual tradition, Rubio argues that moral responsibility for structural evils includes not only causal contributions to harmful structural outcomes but also participation in sinful social forms. Traditionally, this principle has been used to account for the ways in which we can become partially responsible for evil acts performed by others. In Rubio's reformulation, cooperation with evil includes the wrongness of our participation in sinful social forms. I contend that this participation can be understood in two senses: passive and active. In other words, people might participate in social-structural

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[133] Kerans, *Sinful Social Structures*, 100.
[134] Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground: Mediating the Personal and the Political in a Divided Church* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 39.
[135] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 76, art. 2.
[136] See ibid.

sin either by conscious participation with and perpetuation of sinful structures, or simply by the omission of possible action to change these structures. In the same vein, Vidal contends that, "the extent of participation in structural injustices is measured by the criterion of action and passion, that is, by the extent to which each person shapes the unjust social situation and allows himself to be shaped by it."[137]

Indeed, people passively participate in social and structural sins by laziness, apathy, or fear. McKenna contends that apathy is a sin of omission. It is usually a product of a disabled will in the face of massive evils. He writes: "When a person has knowledge of a particular evil but simply lacks motivation to act in any way upon that knowledge, this is apathy and it is a sin in that person."[138] In the same line, in *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia,* John Paul II holds that social sins may be result of the personal sins of "those who are in a position to avoid, eliminate or at least limit certain social evils but who fail to do so out of laziness, fear or the conspiracy of silence" (no. 16). On the other hand, people can actively participate in unjust structures when they maintain and profit from them. John Paul II clearly points out this kind of sinful participation by referring to the personal sins of those who cause or support evil or who exploit it, "through secret complicity or indifference."[139] For Vidal, social sin in such a situation is a result of the human weakness of individuals. He puts it thus: "Here sin consists in the injustice of those who by reason of selfishness, evasion or lack of sensibility, create or culpably maintain structures which oppress human dignity."[140] In short, it can be said that, as a member of society, by participating in unjust structures both passively and actively, to some extent each holds responsibility for evils that stem from unjust social structures.

[137] Vidal, "Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?" 197.
[138] McKenna, "The Possibility of Social Sin," 130-131.
[139] John Paul II, *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 16.
[140] Vidal, "Structural Sin: A New Category in Moral Theology?" 187.

2. A critical and ethical evaluation of abortion in Vietnam in the light of social sin

John Paul II reminds us that naming the reality of sin helps to shed light on the structures and attitudes that harm people. Hence, in light of what we have indicated earlier about social sin and applying it to Vietnam, I argue that sexism, oppressive collective culture, unjust law, and consumerism are four structural and social elements that negatively impact one's moral decision-making.

a. Sexism

Vietnamese-American theologian Peter Phan notes that "the ancient Vietnamese family system was most likely matriarchal, with women ruling over the clan or tribe. Later, adopting the patriarchal system introduced by the Chinese, the Vietnamese began to favor the male and disparage the female. In terms of progeny, a son is said to be worth ten daughters."[141] The woman is said to be governed by three submissions: before marriage, she is subjected to her father; in the marriage bond, to her husband; and when widowed, to her son. Moreover, this sexism is reinforced by the traditional filial piety which plays an important role in Vietnamese culture and is, indeed, manifold. According to this tradition, one of the sacred duties of filial piety is to provide the family with progeny, especially male progeny, so the lineage and family name may be perpetuated.[142] Therefore, having a son is an indispensable duty of a man. As Peter Phan argues, under the influence of literary movements inspired by the French Enlightenment, many unjust customs and practices detrimental to the dignity of women have been abolished; hence, the individual and autonomy have been promoted.[143] In my judgment, this claim is only partly true, because in reality in many parts of Vietnam, especially rural areas, men still rule. Women are relegated to marginal roles, are often discriminated against, and are

[141] Phan, *Vietnamese–American Catholics*, 32.
[142] See ibid., 33.
[143] See ibid., 35.

victims of violence and abuse behind the walls of their homes. Many women do not have a right to their own bodies or decision-making power regarding being a mother. Ivone Gebara notes that studies on the question of evil from the perspective of gender are few, especially in theology.[144]

How does sexism influence one's decision-making in our case study? First, I argue that the structure of the Vietnamese family and society does not support a culture that respects and promotes the dignity of women. In Vietnamese culture, women are still considered inferior and dependent on men.[145] For instance, many families still give priority to their sons obtaining education and receiving heritage. This bias certainly devalues a woman's role in both family and society. What Ivone Gebara rightly pointed out in Brazilian culture is also true in Vietnamese culture: "The fate of being female is often considered a misfortune. One cannot help noticing how many men (and women too) want their first-born to be a boy partly because of the idea that the man keeps the family name, but also because a man has more chances for happiness than a woman."[146] Son-preference strongly influences fertility decisions. Indeed, some scholars, such as Jonathan Haughton and Danièle Belanger, show that due to the importance of having a son, many couples opt for sex-selective abortions of a female fetus.[147]

Therefore, it can be said that sexism certainly exists and influences one's decision-making in many cases of abortion. Indeed, while the high value placed on the boy-child has

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[144] See Ivone Gebara, *Out of the Depths: Women's Experience of Evil and Salvation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 65.
[145] The need for a son is justified in Confucianism as the only way of continuing the family line. Sons carry on the family name, and continue and build on the reputation, tradition and inheritance of family properties. Sons also look after the graves of their ancestors. Failing to have a son is perceived as disrespecting one's ancestors. Sons are the main labourers in the family, particularly in rural areas. See Bang, "Analysis of Socio-political and Health Practices Influencing Sex Ratio at Birth in Viet," 177.
[146] Ibid., 113.
[147] See Jonathan Haughton, "Son Preference in Vietnam," *Studies in Family Planning* 26, no. 6 (1995), 325–27. See also Danièle Belanger, "Son Preference in a Rural Village in North Vietnam," *Studies in Family Planning* 33, no. 4 (2002): 321-34.

been tempered by the influence of the state's social policies and modernity, the eldest boy in a family often still holds preferential status. Therefore, having the first boy-child is considered an inescapable duty of a woman. If couples do not give birth to a son, women will be placed under great pressure. Women might be blamed for infertility or "sonlessness." Some women might be labelled as being "unable to give birth." This reality is demonstrated by many studies; Mead Cain, for instance, asserts that gender inequality in the access and control of resources is a critical factor driving strong son-preference among women.[148]

Furthermore, sex-selective abortions at times are explained in terms of the tradition of filial piety. Due to this tradition, every family wants to have a male child, especially the first born. In many cases, in order to fulfill the desire to have sons for their husbands, many women must have more than one abortion because her family does not want her to give birth to her child if the unborn child is a female. Rachel Burr looked at what it means to be a good child in Vietnam and suggested that ancestral worship—still widely practised throughout the country—was the key element that leads to sex-selective abortion which is also damaging to girls.[149]

Additionally, some studies suggest that this reality has worsened by the one-or-two child policy. According to Burr, due to the limited number of children, if a woman cannot have a first son-child, she is under pressure to have a son in her second pregancy.[150] As a result of

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[148] See Mead Cain, "Patriarchal Structure and Demographic Change," In *Women's Position and Demographic Change*, Nora Federici, Karen Oppenheim Mason, and Sølvi Sogner, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 43–60.

[149] See Rachel Burr, "The Complexity of Morality: Being a 'Good Child' in Vietnam*?" Journal of Moral Education* 43, no. 2 (2014): 156-168.

[150] See ibid., Interestingly, in this article, the author rightly points out that "although the Communist government endeavored to eradicate traditional practices, the most dominant notion of goodness is still bound by the traditional Confucian practice of filial piety and collective endeavor." (158) and Confucian tradition is still important in modern Vietnamese life, especially relating to family or civic duties.

this situation, many women are pressured to choose abortions as a possible solution in hoping that they would have a son in their next pregrancy.

Finally, sexism also significantly impacts the way a man behaves in a sexual relationship. Some studies show that using contraception is seen as a wife's responsibility. For instance, according to Hanh Nguyen, for many Vietnamese, contraception, being pregnant, giving birth, and childrearing are considered to be a woman's "natural function."[151] Similarly, Gammeltoft highlights that fertility control is often perceived as a burden which women have to bear.[152] As a result, women hold all responsibility for an unwanted pregnancy. I contend that such a sexist attitude not only drives some women to have abortions unwillingly, but also leads many young women to lose the confidence and self-esteem to act as autonomous and integral moral agents in the realm of sexuality this harms their moral agency.

In conclusion, it can be said that sexism, justified by patriarchal ideology or by a misunderstanding of anthropological foundation, is a structure of sin that harms moral agency and leads some women to have abortions unwillingly.[153] Undoubtedly, a structure that violates human dignity is a sinful structure. In the Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*, John Paul II affirms that, by mediatating on what the Gospels say about Christ's attitude towards women, "we can conclude that as a man, a son of Israel, he revealed the dignity of the 'daughters of Abraham' (cf. Lk 13:16), the dignity belonging to women from the very 'beginning' on an equal footing with men."[154] Because of sexism, sometimes a woman "is left alone," "while

[151] Nguyen Thi Thuy Hanh, "Reproductive Paradoxes in Vietnam: Masculinity, Contraception, and Abortion in Vietnam," in *Reconceiving the Second Sex: Men, Masculinity, and Reproduction*, eds. Marcia C. Inhorn et al., 160-178 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2009), 167.
[152] See Gammeltoft, "'Faithful, Heroic, Resourceful': Changing Images of Women in Vietnam," in *Vietnamese Society in Transition: The Daily Politics of Reform and Change*, ed. John Kleinen, 265-280 (Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Het Spinhuis, 2001), 274.
[153] See U.S. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Partners in the Mystery of Redemption: A Pastoral Response to Women's Concerns for Church and Society," *Origins* (1988): 762.
[154] John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem: On the Dignity and Vocation of Women*, no. 25.

behind ‘her’ sin there lurks a man a sinner, guilty ‘of the other’s sin’, indeed equally responsible for it.”[155] In this apostolic letter, John Paul II contends that the dignity of women is rooted in the Bible and needs to be protected and promoted. Unfortunatly, sexism still exists in many places all over the world and thereby many women have become the victims of this social sin, suffering due to others’ sins and structural unjustices in society as happens in Vietnam.

b. A collectivist culture

As a collectivist culture, traditional Vietnamese society is centered on the village community and this community is composed of families. In these social structures, the individual’s freedom is very limited. Members of a family are expected to subordinate their personal interests to those of the family as a whole.[156] Everyone has an obligation to take care of and obey the older generation.[157] This culture also strongly impacts marriage and procreation. In other words, the community plays an important role in shaping people’s reproductive desires and behavior.[158] A woman is expected to give birth at least to a son-child for her husband’s family. As explained earlier, failing to do that, the woman will face pressures and frustrations from the family. Such a pressure on the sonless woman worsens because of gossiping in the community where she lives. Many women attempt to become pregnant with a son due partly to this social pressure.

Moreover, a collectivist culture tends to limit individuals in their ability to ask critical questions, which gradually creates a passive tendency in the moral agents. Further, a collective culture prevents one from making one’s own decisions and, consequently, from assuming one’s

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[155] Ibid., 14.
[156] See Mai Huy Bích, *Đặc Điểm Gia Đình Đồng Bằng Sông Hồng* [Family Features in the Red River Delta] (Hà Nội: Culture Publishers, 1993).
[157] See Phạm Văn Bích, *The Vietnamese Family in Change: The Case of the Red River Delta* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999), 18-19.
[158] See Minh Hang Tran, *Global Debates, Local Dilemmas Sex-selective Abortion in Contemporary Viet Nam* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018), 66.

own responsibility. Indeed, a sense of responsibility develops only through repeatedly making intentional, responsible, and knowledgeable decisions. When one is not encouraged to make decisions and be responsible, one probably will not cultivate and grow in one's sense of responsibility. Many educators have explained the current moral crisis in Vietnam in terms of a crisis of moral responsibility.

In addition, it is evident that family dynamics play a very significant role in Vietnamese culture. In this communally-oriented culture, everyone tries to save face for each other. Loss of face is painful in any society, but unbearable in Vietnam. If a young woman gets pregnant outside of wedlock, her misconduct is blamed not only on herself but also on her ancestors, parents, siblings, and friends. Faced with this situation, the family strongly influences what the young woman might do. In some cases, it can be said that she had an abortion not because she wants to or because her conscience dictated it, but rather because she thought it was the best solution to save her family's reputation. Therefore, it is evident that the difficult decision is made for the benefit of her own family. It is my experience that one of the main reasons why Vietnamese single women have abortions is to avoid public rumor, to save the family's reputation, or to avoid punishment and rebuke from their parents.

Due to the collectivist culture, Vietnamese youth have a very limited ability to exercise responsibility. Therefore, faced with difficult situations, they do not know how to make a good decision. It is evident that the responsibility of the partner also plays an important role in the case of abortion. Stanley Hauerwas reminds us that "the most critical factor in the decision to abort was the relationship with the male partner."[159] This factor is especially true in Vietnam where a young woman might decide to have an abortion because her partner refuses to assume

[159] Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Teaching* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 200.

his responsibility. In such a situation, a woman may face many difficulties if she wants to keep her child. The irresponsibility of a young man might force a young girl to decide to do what she may not want to do. It is even worse for the woman because, in this case, she is the only one who has to shoulder the burden of guilt for the abortion.

The preceding analysis shows how unjust cultural practices may create sinful situations in which one can easily fall into sin. It is difficult to realize and overcome these structures because they tend to hide themselves within the culture. Unjust structures and cultural ignorance might lead a person's conscience to be mistaken, as we discussed in the first chapter.

c. Unjust law and public policies

I contend that policy plays an important role in explaining what has been happening in Vietnam. As presented above, abortion was legalized and has been considered a means of contraception. To attain the set goal, the government sometimes encouraged people to have abortions and so normalized this immoral action by using the confused term "menstrual regulation" instead of abortion. This reality clearly reflects the nature of social sin that tends to hide the immoral action as indicated by the Catholic moral tradition. It is evident that this usage makes many people misunderstand what they actually chose to do.

Moreover, it is very important to note the language used in the population law. The most popular terms are "strategy," "benefits," and "planning"–terms that are often used in economics. This law does not aim to protect the dignity of the human being; rather, the law aims to reduce, to control, and to improve the quality of the population. Annika Johansson and others observe that in almost all cases they studied, the major reason for abortion was expressed in economic terms.[160] They also highlight that the view of abortion has been presented in

[160] See Johansson, et al., "Husbands' Involvement in Abortion in Vietnam," 405.

technical terms as a medical intervention. Ethical aspects of abortion and how they might be dealt with in counseling situations are not mentioned in these documents.[161] Such legal language in Vietnam mirrors, in part, the collectivist culture in which an individual is not respected as a human being and at times is considered just a thing and a number.

Therefore, it can be said that the population law has ignored the ethical aspects of abortion. In my view, in Vietnam, "there is a need to recover the basic elements of a vision of the relationship between civil law and moral law."[162] The relationship between civil law and moral law has been thoughtfully discussed by Pope John Paul II. Indeed, the pope recognizes that "the purpose of the civil law is different and more limited in scope than that of the moral law."[163] The pope also reaffirms the content of *Donum vitae*, contending that the civil law can neither replace one's conscience nor dictate norms concerning matters outside its competence.[164] Following St. Thomas Aquinas,[165] the pope agrees that "public authority can sometimes choose not to put a stop to something which were it prohibited would cause more serious harm."[166] However, it is clear that this principle should not legitimize any "offence against other persons caused by the disregard of so fundamental a right as the right to life."[167] Civil law must ensure that all members of society enjoy respect for certain fundamental rights which belong to the person, rights which every positive law must recognize and guarantee.[168]

One may argue that a decision to have an abortion does not totally depend on the legislation of abortion because there are many private medical centers which a woman may

[161] See ibid., 407.
[162] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 71.
[163] Ibid.
[164] See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation Donum Vitae* (22 February 1987), III: *AAS* 80 (1988), 98.
[165] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I-II, q. 93, a. 3, ad 2um.
[166] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 71.
[167] Ibid.
[168] See ibid.

access to have abortions. I think that it is important to note the pedagogical dimension of the law. Although legislation does not directly affect the decision of those who want to have an abortion, such legislation makes many people gradually think that it is morally acceptable to have an abortion.[169] People tend not to raise the ethical question regarding what is legal. Moreover, because of the political situation, the law was composed and approved by members of the Communist party without consulting the opinions of citizens. The citizens could not express their own opinions and reclaims their rights. Moreover, due to the education of a collectivist culture, the people, especially women, are not ready to participate in public discussion. They are silent because they are not accustomed to expressing their own opinions. This silence is clearly contrary to what should be because "the law should always express the opinion and will of the majority of citizens."[170] As a result, "choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable."[171]

In addition, some scholars have argued that parental discrimination against a female fetus is exacerbated by strict population policies.[172] It can be said that any social-structural evil causes a number of other evils. Indeed, the one-or-two-child policy introduced new potential contradictions regarding women's fertility. On the one hand, women who do not have a son worry about not having a male heir. On the other hand, they feel pressure from local authorities to keep to the two-child limit. The social value placed on having a son coupled with policy-led restrictions on family size can lead to consequences other than sex-selective abortion that are also damaging to girls. Finally, public policies on social security, the market and healthcare

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[169] See John T. Noonan, *The Morality of Abortion: Legal and Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 143.
[170] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 68.
[171] Ibid., no. 4.
[172] See Annika Johansson, et al., "Husbands' Involvement in Abortion in Vietnam," *Studies in Family Planning* 29, no. 4 (1998): 400-413.

services also certaintly influence son-preference in the contemporary context. Indeed, social security systems are very weak in Vietnam; in such a situation, most people must be self-reliant. Elderly people usually depend on their children, primarily their son(s), as Tran suggests.[173] In my view, this defect of social policy likely has increased the value of sons to their parents. Most parents tend to have at least a boy-child as insurance for their elderly lives and this, consequently, can lead to sex-selective abortions.

d. Consumerism and social justice

First, the Vietnamese society today is acutely influenced by materialism and consumerism. Materialism and possession of things have become very important in the lives of many. Therefore, for many, having is more significant than being. This is demonstrated by the government's ambitious population policy that seeks to create a society in which every person can possess as much as possible. In such a society, a human being is somehow considered property. Being influenced by the mentality of materialism and consumerism, some young people are losing or forgetting the transcendental dimension of life. For John Paul II, "when the sense of God is lost, there is also a tendency to lose the sense of man, of his dignity and his life."[174] The human being seems to be reduced to the physical horizon, and "he is somehow reduced to being 'a thing.' He no longer considers life as a splendid gift of God, something 'sacred' entrusted to his responsibility and thus also to his loving care and 'veneration.'"[175] It seems that some lose sight of the truth of life, that is, that having things must serve the being of the living person, and not vice versa. Correa and Sgreccia remind us

[173] See Tran, *Global Debates, Local Dilemmas Sex-selective Abortion in Contemporary Viet Nam,* 68.
[174] John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life*, no. 21.
[175] Ibid., no. 22.

that life is the being of human beings, not one of a person's states.[176] Life is one of the most important values in Vietnamese culture.[177] The Vietnamese people commonly speak of life as a gift of Heaven. In the logic of gift, clearly, we do not have the gift of life but we are this gift; it is not up to us to destroy this gift.[178] Because life is God's gift, although we can and should intervene to heal, we have no right to exercise choice by interfering in the natural process of a life's beginning.[179]

In sum, we can say that negative social influences lead many Vietnamese youth to lose the true value of life. Somehow, life becomes 'a thing' that can be thrown away. Pope Francis usually refers to some aspects of our culture as the "throw away culture."[180] He affirms, "A widespread mentality of the 'culture of waste' that today enslaves the hearts and minds of so many, comes at a very high cost: it asks for the elimination of human beings, especially if they are physically or socially weaker."[181]

Secondly, in recent years, the movement of rural populations out of agriculture in search of jobs in urban centers has dramatically increased. Along with this process, many new economic, social, and ethical challenges have emerged, especially for the young. For example, poor country girls have to leave their village to come to the city to earn a living where they

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[176] See Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia, eds., *Evangelium Vitae: Five Years of Confrontation with the Society: Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life: Vatican City, 11-14 February 2000* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), 422.
[177] See Juan de Dios Vial Correa and Elio Sgreccia, eds., *Evangelium Vitae: Five Years of Confrontation with the Society: Proceedings of the Sixth Assembly of the Pontifical Academy for Life: Vatican City, 11-14 February 2000* (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2001), 422.
[178] See ibid., 443.
[179] See Edward Vacek, S.J., "God's Gifts and Our Moral Lives," in *Method and Catholic Moral Theology: The Ongoing Reconstruction,* ed. Todd Salzman (Omaha, NE: Creighton University Press, 1999), 111.
[180] See Francis, "Address to Participants in the Meeting Organized by the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations," (Sept. 20, 2013), at http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130920_associazioni-medici-cattolici.html
[181] Ibid.

face many social and economic challenges, such as loneliness, lack of family support, an unstable income, sexual abuse, etc. Being alone in a big city, many young women become pregnant outside of wedlock. Sometimes a pregnancy is the result of a free choice but, because of economic difficulties, the woman might want to abort because she cannot keep the unborn child. In these circumstances, the woman is faced with difficult choices when she knows her limits to meet the most basic responsibilities to a child and others. How can she give birth to a child with a salary just enough to afford her own living cost? Y-Lan Tran, a Vietnamese theologian and medical doctor, rightly points out that "without familial and financial support, single girls become pregnant and often resort to abortion."[182] Indeed, the costs of raising children has been rising rapidly; the high cost of having children is an important concern for many young couples.

Finally, sometimes some women become pregnant because they are victims of sexual abuse or sexual attacks. And, of course, the men who abused them often refuse to take responsibility for their abuses. In such situations, a woman faces an ordeal and great human and social challenges if she wants to keep the child. In this situation, young and poor girls have lost control over their lives, their bodies and their sexuality; the women's pregnancies were not fully voluntary, and yet often they were also lacking the resources and support they needed to become mothers if they were to give birth. Unfortunately, in a such situation, the woman holds the responsibility for the sin of the man.

In summary, by naming social factors that negatively impact a moral agent, I have explained how unjust social customs and evil structures may limit or distort the freedom of a moral agent. Therefore, this approach is of great importance to address a moral problem such

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[182] Y-Lan Tran, "Vietnam in Transition: Theological and Ethical Challenges," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Brazal (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 51.

as abortion in Vietnam; it is not enough to ascribe all responsibility to individuals and to condemn them accordingly. Rather, it is important to address social and structural factors that suppress the dignity of human beings and distort their moral capacities for making good and sound moral decisions. Being conscious of the fact that evil outcomes are the results of both social structures and individual choices, our responses should accordingly reflect both personal and communal dimensions. For this reason, in the last chapter, I propose that solidarity and conversion are required to respond to the tragic situation of abortion in Vietnam.

Chapter 3: SOLIDARITY, CONSCIENCE, AND RESPONSIBILITY

By recognizing that human beings are, by nature, interdependent, as confirmed by both Catholic anthropological theology and Vietnamese culture and tradition, we acknowledge that all of us are called to be in solidarity with all human beings. This call to solidarity pushes us to contemplate the suffering of others and to attempt to understand the cry of the wounded. As an ethical imperative, such solidarity continues to call us to promote the human dignity of those who are oppressed and marginalized. This understanding of solidarity becomes a power that compels all people to act in order to eliminate the suffering of others.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (SRS), John Paul II offers an extensive treatment of solidarity and describes it as a virtue. According to him, solidarity "is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."[183] This definition implies a human *telos* that includes flourishing in both a social and a personal way. Kenneth Himes et al. contend that the use of solidarity as a virtue in SRS underscores a theme that is often

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[183] John Paul II, *On Social Concern - Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1987), no. 38.

overlooked in Catholic Social Teaching (CST): the need for a change of heart as well as a change of structures.[184] In recent years, some ethicists have begun to examine links between structural change and personal flourishing. Similarly, some theologians refer to solidarity as a possible way to deal with particular evils. For example, Lisa Cahill highlights the fact that on abortion John Paul II names solidarity as a virtue necessary to address the problem of abortion.[185] Drawing on this inspiration, through the lens of virtue, this chapter argues that one's cultivation of the virtue of solidarity, in both Christians and non-Christians, can transform the society in which one lives.

To attain this goal, in dialogue with the contemporary scholarly discussion on the virtue of solidarity, this chapter proceeds with the following four steps. First, the chapter briefly introduces the key elements of the Catholic ethic of solidarity. Then, it presents a comprehensive account of the virtue of solidarity, explaining what the principle of solidarity is and how one cultivates this virtue by practicing it. After that, it explains the relationship between the virtue of solidarity and the structure of sin, and how one's cultivation of solidarity can be linked to the transformation of the societies which one inhabits, and in a more particular way, how the practice of solidarity addresses the social problems in our specific research on abortion. Finally, the chapter will suggest some practical and pastoral implications for our discussion.

1. The key elements of the Catholic ethic of solidarity

Although the theological term solidarity has been widely discussed among Christian ethicists, it is worth noting that Pope Pius XII was the first pope to explicitly use the term

[184] See Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, and Thomas Shannon, "Commentary on *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,*" in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes et al. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 427-428.
[185] See Cahill, *Theological Bioethics*, 172.

"solidarity" in his writings, referring to Scripture to ground his claims. In his 1939 encyclical *Summi Pontificatus*, he argued that "the first page of Scripture" (Gen 1:26–27) undergirds the law of "human solidarity and charity," revealing our common origin and that all human beings are created in the image of God.[186] According to René Coste, solidarity constitutes one of the great themes of *Gaudium et spes* and is mentioned explicitly in numbers 4, 31, 57, and 85.[187] Pope Paul VI takes up this term when he refers to "the spirit of solidarity" in his encyclical *Populorum Progressio*. Building on this document, 20 years later, John Paul II elevated the importance of solidarity within questions of ethics and identity in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis.* John Paul II contends that "true development must be based on the love of God and neighbor, and must help to promote the relationships between individuals and society."[188]

Traditionally, solidarity is necessarily linked to human dignity and human rights. Indeed, to assure the conditions for development, solidarity requires both a radical commitment to protect the dignity of each person and that of the whole human family. Throughout the tradition, solidarity is understood as a principle, a duty, an attitude, and a virtue. As an attitude, each of us is called to be aware of our interdependence; as a duty, solidarity lays down normative foundations that evoke a sense of responsibility for others.

In a recent article, Gerald J. Beyer presents a very good summary of the biblical and theological foundations of the virtue of solidarity. He contends that "the Bible may not use the word solidarity, but numerous texts provide a foundation upon which modern CST is built."[189]

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[186] Pius XII, *On the Unity of Human Society* - *Summi Pontificatus* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1939), no. 35.
[187] See René Coste, "Solidarité," in *Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* (Beauchesne Éditeur: Paris, 1990), 1000-1001; Charles E. Curran, Kenneth R. Himes, and Thomas Shannon, "Commentary on *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*," 429. See also Marie Vianney Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty? Or the Virtue for an Interdependent World* (New York: Peter Lang, 1999), 8.
[188] John Paul II, *On Social Concern - Sollicitudo Rei Socialis,* no. 33.
[189] Gerald Beyer, "The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching," *Political Theology* 15, no. 1 (2014): 7-25.

He maintains that CST has developed its conception of solidarity within a rich biblical and theological framework.[190] The foundation of solidarity is an anthropological "datum" that realizes that human beings are by nature interdependent. On account of this, the good of individuals is predicated on the development and good of the whole human family. Solidarity entails the recognition that we are one human family whose members are called to love and care for one another. The virtue of solidarity requires us to be a part of the whole human family. For John Paul II, solidarity is not just "vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others" but rather "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all responsible for all."[191]

In CST, solidarity is often understood in three ways: a duty, a principle, and a virtue. Marie Vianney Bilgrien recognizes that "only since 1987 has solidarity been considered and analyzed as a virtue," and that "it has a much longer history as an attitude, duty or principle."[192] Bilgrien contends that John Paul II offers solidarity as a virtue in SRS because he recognizes that virtue is more effective in transforming persons and society.[193] In SRS, John Paul II offers an extensive treatment of solidarity, and for the first time in a magisterial document describes it as a "virtue." Although John Paul II names solidarity as a virtue, in his encyclical, "there is little evidence that the Pope is working from a Thomistic framework of virtue ethics."[194] In other words, by being distant from Thomistic tradition, John Paul II did not provide a sound account of the virtue of solidarity. Moreover, as Himes and others argue, one might raise the concern that such an emphasis on solidarity as a virtue, like John Paul II's use of other theological language, might lead to a displacement of the centrality of justice and the common

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[190] See Ibid.
[191] John Paul II, *On Social Concern - Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.
[192] Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty?*, 60.
[193] See Ibid., 94.
[194] Tisha M. Rajendra, "Burdened Solidarity: The Virtue of Solidarity in Diaspora," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 1 (2019), 95.

good in Catholic social teaching.[195] This concern might lead us to a further question: what is the relationship between solidarity, justice, and the common good?

In response to these issues, the following part attempts to give an account of the virtue of solidarity in Thomas Aquinas's view of virtue ethics. In other words, I answer some important questions such as: If solidarity is a virtue, what are its principles? Is solidarity an infused virtue or an acquired virtue?

2. Searching for a comprehensive account of the virtue of solidarity

a. What is the virtue of solidarity?

As noted, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, the virtue of solidarity "is not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the *common good*; that is to say to *the good of all and of each individual* because we are really all *responsible* for all."[196]

From this definition, it is easy to recognize the formal object and the material object of solidarity. The former is clearly our common humanity and the latter is the common good that includes the good of all and of each individual. Rooted in the Thomistic tradition, Marie Vianney Bilgrien and Meghan Clark attempt to give John Paul's account of solidarity an Aristotelian and Thomistic basis.[197] Both theologians place solidarity in the context of traditional principles of CST such as the common good and the dignity of human beings.[198] Like Bilgrien, Clark contends that the formal object of solidarity is common humanity and its

[195] See Curran, Himes, and Shannon, "Commentary on *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*," 430.
[196] John Paul II, *On Social Concern - Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38, emphasis added.
[197] See Meghan Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought: The Virtue of Solidarity and the Praxis of Human Rights* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014), 124.
[198] See Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty?*, 106.

telos is the universal common good. Unlike Bilgrien, however, Clark insists on the active participation of the poor in the process of solidarity. In a recent article, Tisha M. Rajendra argues that almost all Christian ethicists fail to consider the fact that there may be an inconsistency between the practice of solidarity and its object, the common good.[199] Her argument is based on a "dialectical relationship" between the flourishing both of the individual and the social context. She holds that, in Clark's account of the virtue of solidarity, there is a degree of risk to the bearer in the virtue of solidarity and this practice of solidarity might pose a threat to the common good.[200]

Moreover, from his definition, it seems that John Paul II undervalues the affective dimension of solidarity. Donal Dorr realizes this gap in John Paul's account of solidarity and contends that it is important to be attentive to the affective dimension of the virtue. He puts it thus: "there is one point at which his account of the virtue of solidarity seems to be somewhat underdeveloped: it appears to lack an affective dimension: account of the experience of solidarity and the strong feelings that are part of it."[201] I think that this is an important consideration because the affect plays a vital role in the formation of virtues. Clearly, in an existential community, one shares the sufferings and joys, fears and hopes of others. By sharing the same experience, one grows in a sense of belonging, the feeling of being part of these people. This shared feeling and the sense of belonging to one's group evoke and nurture the sense of responsibility for one another. They thus experience individually that their lives cannot be fulfilled without the participation of others.

[199] See Rajendra, "Burdened Solidarity: The Virtue of Solidarity in Diaspora," 98.
[200] See ibid.
[201] Donal Dorr, "Solidarity and Integral Human Development," in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul II's Encyclical on Social Concern,* eds. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 143-154 , at 153.

In my view, James Keenan's definition of solidarity sheds particular light on these issues. Inspired by his own experience, Keenan states that "solidarity is not first and foremost a principle for action; solidarity is an affective and spiritual union with others whose life situations are also being challenged and compromised. From that union, we are called to act in justice. Solidarity is then first a fundamental, existential, deeply felt sense of union; but secondly it is a call to engage in certain moral practices to better the life situation of the other."[202] In this definition, it is easy to realize the balance of two dimensions of the virtue of solidarity: the affective and the practical. Some may raise the concern that such an emphasis on the affective dimension of solidarity might lead to undervaluing its practical dimension. It is true that virtues, in the Thomistic sense, need to be practiced and to lead to action. In other words, a virtue is not only an attitude or a disposition; rather, it is a disposition that must be actualized in a concrete action. I argue that, however, this does not refute the affective dimension of the virtue of solidarity. Indeed, only by practicing the virtue are the internal feelings of belonging and of union evoked and nurtured. In living out the experience of solidarity, one grows in the feeling of union with others and from that union, one is called to act in justice for the sake of others.

b. Is solidarity a Christian virtue?

In John Paul's account, solidarity is undoubtedly a Christian virtue. Solidarity is closely related to key Christian concepts such as gratuity, forgiveness, and reconciliation. For John Paul II, solidarity is a Christian virtue because it is founded not only on human and natural bonds, but also on awareness of the common fatherhood of God, in light of the communion of the Trinity.[203] The pope insists that, by the grace of God, a Christian might become a

[202] James Keenan, "Impasse and Solidarity in Theological Ethics," *CTSA Proceedings* 64 (2009), 50.
[203] See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 40.

"sacrament" by which the grace of God can be transmitted to others. He strongly trusts in the positive transformation of human nature that is effected in virtue of the love of the Father, the redemption brought by Jesus Christ, and the action of the Holy Spirit. John Paul II insists that because a human being is the image of the Creator and placed under the redemptive influence of Christ, therefore, despite the heritage of sin and the sin which each one is capable of committing, there still exist in the human person sufficient qualities and energies for a fundamental goodness.[204] Thus John Paul II's optimistic view reflects the Thomistic view of human nature. As Lisa Cahill explains, "Aquinas places considerable trust in human reason and evinces a comparable degree of optimism about the potential of natural humanity, hindered though it may be by sin and ignorance, to establish justice in personal and social relationships and thereby achieve a peaceful political order governed by law."[205]

Although solidarity is a Christian virtue, it is also found in other contexts. Indeed, solidarity plays an important role in many cultures and religious traditions. For example, the Vietnamese people, in the context of their constant striving for independence in the face of invasion by other countries, have developed and transmitted many narratives that encourage a sense of the union of the whole people of the nation. This view is confirmed by the emphasis CST places on the fact that the human being is social. Solidarity in CST calls for this kind of unity among differences. It entails the recognition of the *de facto* interdependence of all human beings. CST claims that, as human beings, we share a common human nature, and therefore we have responsibility for one another. Some argue that solidarity could exist only among those with the same interests, but CST suggests a solidarity that can transcend the boundaries of class, gender, race, and nationality.[206] Along the same lines, Thomas Massaro contends that

[204] See ibid., no. 47.
[205] Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Blessed Are the Peacemakers: Pacifism, Just War, and Peacebuilding* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019), 144.
[206] See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 38-9.

solidarity is something which belongs to the natural capacity of all human beings. He says that "to be human is to have a heart that is moved by stories of desperate need and crying injustices. Humanitarian responses to people in crisis are practically instinctual."[207]

Is it possible for all human beings to practice solidarity? Some pessimistically maintain that solidarity exists only among those having the same interest. This implies that the virtue of solidarity does not belong to human nature and is not a duty or principle which is demanded for all. In his recent article, Beyer attempts to demonstrate the possibility of solidarity, in part responding to some biologists who contend that human beings are essentially selfish and so always acting in their own interest while occasionally masquerading as altruists. He argues that "universal solidarity is not contrary to human nature. Rather, social solidarity is an expression of inherent tendencies built upon the evolved biological origins of the human species."[208] In another article, Beyer contends that "this vision of the human person, the font of solidarity, can be construed as a Christian theological anthropology, but it does not have to be. Nonbelievers can also share it."[209]

Within the Thomistic view, the virtue of solidarity can be considered in terms of acquired virtue or infused virtue. If solidarity is an infused virtue, it must come from God's grace and therefore is accessible only to Christians. In other words, one might raise the question of whether the virtue of solidarity is accessible and applicable to all persons, or something that is distinctively Christian. Or is it both? In response to this issue, William Mattison contends that the Thomistic tradition on virtue is especially helpful in solving the apparent dilemma.

[207] Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2008), 4.
[208] Gerald J. Beyer, "Solidarity by Grace, Nature or Both? The Possibility of Human Solidarity in the Light of Evolutionary Biology and Catholic Moral Theology," *Heythrop Journal* 54, no. 5 (2013), 732.
[209] Beyer, "The Meaning of Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching," 12.

First, Mattison argues that the relationship between solidarity and charity is an appropriate way to address this issue.[210] By explaining Thomas' view on virtue, he argues that solidarity is a moral virtue because it is "oriented toward natural human happiness."[211] By explaining what a theological virtue is, Mattison concludes that "since solidarity's object is not God directly, and since solidarity is possible without God's grace directing one to the supernatural destiny of eternal happiness, it is not a theological virtue, but rather a moral virtue."[212] By using the famous formula of Aquinas, grace perfects nature, Mattison insists that "infused solidarity retains important continuities with the acquired 'human solidarity' accessible to all."[213] He rightly points out the character of continuity and the difference between the two different natures of a virtue as solidarity. Indeed, the ultimate goal of the persons with each virtue differs, and thus the immediate actions have different meanings.

In short, solidarity is a helpful term for the two audiences that CST and John Paul II address in their social encyclicals: Catholics and all people of good will.[214] Solidarity is understood well by both audiences. All human beings can appreciate the interdependence of the world in which we live and the need to respond to that interdependence in a spirit of solidarity. Such an account of solidarity is confirmed and enforced by the recent contributions of virtue ethicists.

c. The practice of solidarity

Moral virtue is formed by habit and it is through this habituation process that it becomes second nature, a firm character. Explaining how the moral agent can be virtuous, Aristotle

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[210] See William C. Mattison III, "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching: An Inquiry Employing Thomistic Categories of Virtue," *Journal of Catholic Social Thought* 15, no. 1 (2018), 36.
[211] Ibid., also see Thomas Aquinas, ST II-II, q. 62, a. 2, ad. 1 and q. 63, a. 2.
[212] Mattison, "Solidarity in Catholic Social Teaching," 41.
[213] Ibid., 42.
[214] See Curran, Himes, and Shannon, "Commentary on *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*," 429.

states: "first of all, he must know what he is doing; secondly, he must choose to act the way he does, and he must choose it for its own sake and in the third place, the act must spring from a firm and unchanging character."[215] In recent works, in different ways, many ethicists contend that community plays a pivotal role in the formation of a virtue. Lúcás Chan, a Catholic theologian, points out that the importance of community in virtue formation is built upon the fundamental presupposition that virtue is teachable.[216] Among Protestant ethicists, Stanley Hauerwas is known for focusing on the notion of character and the roles of community and narrative in moral formation.[217] In short, in different ways, ethicists confirm the importance community plays in virtue formation.

Similarly, in his account of solidarity, John Paul II insists that this virtue must be exercised within each society and within international society.[218] As a social virtue, the practice of solidarity importantly requires the role of the community. In other words, solidarity is a virtue that individuals must develop and practice in their social relations. To practice the virtue of solidarity, one needs to be nurtured by sympathy and compassion, which are the conditions for promoting solidarity. Solidarity, after all, is not something that can be done alone—it requires the agency and gift of grace extended by another, in this case, the poor. In reaching out to the poor and the suffering in mercy, and in offering to help carry their burdens, the non-poor find themselves borne up by the faith and the generosity of the poor.[219] Christianity offers us a way to allow our suffering, especially through solidarity with others, to generate new life.

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[215] Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book II, 4, par. 3.
[216] See Yiu Sing Lúcás Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes: Biblical Studies and Ethics for Real Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012), 8.
[217] See Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Teaching*, chapters 6 and 7.
[218] See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39.
[219] See Mark Potter, "Solidarity as Spiritual Exercise: Accompanying Migrants at the US/Mexico Border," *Political Theology* 12, no. 6 (2011), 836.

Being with others in their sufferings is a key to the mystery of Christianity. As Christians, we are called to imitate God when we are willing and ready to enter into the chaos of others.[220] Helping anyone in need is entering into the entire "problem" or "chaos" of their situation. By the mystery of the Incarnation, the Word of God has entered into the chaos of human existence so that by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are brought out of the chaos of our slavery to sin. By imitating Christ, Christians are called to practice solidarity and mercy; by doing so, we become more like God who entered into our own chaos.[221] Moreover, only by becoming involved in others' situations and chaos can we understand the reason why others are in chaos. Bilgrien highlights that "the first element of solidarity is an open ear and an open heart for the needs and the suffering"[222] of others. This leads us eventually to face what causes that chaos. By encountering others, we are able to be awakened to the call of solidarity that leads us to act for the common good and for justice. Therefore, the acts of solidarity necessarily require being with others, especially the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized. Acting in solidarity allows us to meet people in need and, in turn, we are moved to promote justice.

d. Exemplars in the virtue of solidarity

Chan contends that "virtue ethics also appreciates the role that exemplary figures play in the development of virtue and formation of character."[223] For him, exemplars first show us what a virtue means practically and, secondly, teach and encourage us to act likewise.[224] Patrick

[220] See James Keenan, *Moral Wisdom: Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition,* 3rd ed., (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 83.
[221] See ibid., 124.
[222] Bilgrien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty?,* 97.
[223] Chan, *The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes*, 12.
[224] See ibid.

M. Clark argues for an expanded role of moral exemplars in contemporary virtue ethics.[225] He builds his argument by beginning with the work on exemplarism of Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, who contends that paradigmatically good persons are crucial for understanding the meaning of goodness and virtue.[226] In presenting an account of the virtue of solidarity, John Paul II insists on the role of exemplars in practicing the virtue by saying that many of the Church's canonized saints "offer a wonderful witness of such solidarity and can serve as examples in the present difficult circumstances."[227]

Interestingly, according to Christopher P. Vogt, Clark links this general theory to the Christocentric approaches to moral theology found in the work of Livio Melina and in *Veritatis Splendor*, both of which put forward Jesus Christ as the ultimate exemplar and norm for Christians.[228] In other words, Jesus becomes the exemplar for the practice of the virtue of solidarity. From this insight, Mark Potter offers an account of solidarity in the *Spiritual Exercises*. By doing so, he presents a helpful way of understanding the dynamics of solidarity as a relevant praxis of mutual transformation.[229] In the *Spiritual Exercises*, retreatants are called to contemplate the earthly life and the mission of Jesus. By doing so, they learn from him how to involve themselves in others' chaos, how to be compassionate to others' feelings and needs, how to act for the sake of others. The third week of the *Spiritual Exercises* brings the retreatant through a particularly difficult but powerful contemplation of compassion: Jesus's compassion for the world, and the apostolic call to unite Jesus' Passion to one's own life, so as to respond

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[225] See Patrick M. Clark, "The Case for an Exemplarist Approach to Virtue in Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 3 (2014): 54-82.
[226] See Linda Trinkaus Zagzebski, *Exemplarist Moral Theory* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2017).
[227] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 40.
[228] See Christopher P. Vogt, "Virtue: Personal Formation and Social Transformation," *Theological Studies* 77, no.1 (2015), 187.
[229] See Potter, "Solidarity as Spiritual Exercise: Accompanying Migrants at the US/Mexico Border," 831.

to the world's needs. The emphasis on relationality in the Trinity itself and in Jesus as our model for solidarity acknowledges both the transcendent dimension and the historical purpose of the human being. By emphasizing the role of experience, feminists refer to the exemplary role of Jesus who joins with all kinds of people in solidarity, be they lepers, the woman at the well, tax collectors, or prostitutes.

In short, as a social virtue, an exemplar plays an important role in the formation of the virtues. Each culture and tradition contains a variety of narratives that foster solidarity within that people. Christian narratives center on the incarnate mystery of Jesus Christ; thereby Christian solidarity embraces Jesus Christ as the ultimate exemplar.

3. The virtue of solidarity and the structure of sin

On October 23, 2019, many Vietnamese around the world were shocked when they came to know that 39 Vietnamese were found dead in a refrigerated trailer discovered in Grays, a town next to the Thames River, east of London. The 39 victims were young and poor undocumented immigrants who had been convinced that they could find a good job in England and, thereby, help their families. Many Vietnamese were deeply moved when they read that one of the victims had texted her parents, "I'm dying because I can't breathe," and then apologized because her "path abroad didn't succeed."[230] In the following days, I received some messages and phone calls from my family and friends. We talked about this; and friends of mine who hold US citizenship also showed their sorrow and compassion to the victims because they said that we are Vietnamese and we love these people.

[230] Elian Peltier, "U.K. Police Release Names of 39 People Found Dead in Essex Truck," *The New York Times* (2019), at https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/08/world/europe/essex-lorry-victims-names.html

Through social media, many Vietnamese shared their feelings and sorrow with the families of the victims. Surprisingly for me, many people began to question why so many young Vietnamese risk their lives to find a better life. They also referred to the fact that many victims came from a place where their livelihoods had been destroyed by the toxic pollution that results from irresponsible and unsustainable business practices.[231] Reflecting on what happened, I think that, amidst these disasters, the Vietnamese showed a spiritual union with others whose life situations were also being challenged. From that union, these people became aware of unjust social structures that lead to these disasters. In my view, this solidarity could become a call to engage in certain moral practices to ameliorate the life situations of others.

Given such massive suffering on a global scale, it is crucial that all those who wish to address human needs and dismantle unjust social structures share their insights and work together practically to make solidarity a greater reality. In the following section, I will suggest how the practice of solidarity might make social transformation possible.

a. Bringing us together

A person is a social being. No one is an island; no one can live one's life fully without others. In SRS, John Paul II asserts this truth when he says that "today perhaps more than in the past, people are realizing that they are linked together by a common destiny, which is to be constructed together, if catastrophe for all is to be avoided."[232] This reality of interdependence reminds us of "the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane."[233] Clearly, John Paul II realized positive signs of a growing awareness of the solidarity of the poor among themselves, in "their efforts to support one another, and their

[231] See Angel L. Martínez Cantera, "'We Are Jobless Because of Fish Poisoning': Vietnamese Fishermen Battle for Justice," *The Guardian* (2017), https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2017/aug/14/vietnamese-fishermen-jobless-fish-poisoning-battle-justice.
[232] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 26.
[233] Ibid.

public demonstrations on the social scene which, without recourse to violence, present their own needs and rights in the face of the inefficiency or corruption of the public authorities."[234]

To analogy, this approach can also be applied by international relationships. Therefore, for John Paul II, the reality of interdependence must be transformed into solidarity, based upon the principle that the goods of creation are meant for all. This reality demonstrates how solidarity can lead to a possibility of social transformation when it gathers the strengths of a group that shares the same sense of responsibility for justice and the common good. In other words, the virtue of solidarity enhances the communal power that might help one get involved in the mission to protect and promote the dignity of human beings. On the one hand, Doran contends that the human person is called to transcend herself in co-existence and co-action. Therefore, in solidarity with others, each person "recognizes that there is no conflict between the good of the person and the good of the community, but that these goods can really only be achieved together."[235] On the other hand, Gregory Baum argues that in his encyclical *Redemptor hominis*, by laying a Christological foundation for the Church's social ministry, John Paul II contends that Jesus Christ identified himself in some sense with all human beings in their historical groupings.[236] As a result, solidarity is not a class struggle; rather, it is an ethical achievement. Far from a class struggle, people who stand together in the struggle for justice are impelled by several motives, including ethical ones.

b. A way to protect and promote human rights and human dignity

As Clark argues, there is a close link between solidarity and human rights or human dignity. As a social virtue, the *telos* of solidarity is not limited to the flourishing of an

[234] Ibid.
[235] Kevin Doran, *Solidarity: A Synthesis of Personalism and Communalism in the Thought of Karol Wojtyla/John Paul II* (New York: P. Lang, 1996), 237.
[236] See Gregory Baum, "Class Struggle and the Magisterium: A New Note," *Theological Studies* 45 (1984), 694.

individual; rather, "through the virtue of solidarity, we can begin to be more fully what we ought to be,"[237] as Clark puts it. For John Paul II, the good of a community is realized only when "its members recognize one another as persons."[238] The common good has always played an important role in CST because it focuses on both the person and the community. This double focus is further highlighted in Pope John XXIII's definition of the common good. In his encyclical *Mater et Magistra*, the Pope defines the common good as "the sum total of those conditions of social living, whereby men are enabled more fully and more readily to achieve their own perfection."[239] In this encyclical, the pope also argues that true community exists "only if individual members are considered and treated as persons, and are encouraged to participate in the affairs of the group."[240] Because of the tight connection between human rights and the common good, CST reminds us of a profound obligation to promote the human rights and flourishing of others as part of the common good. To some extent, the common good is also the origin and meaning of political authority, as Christiansen notes in commenting on *Pacem in Terris,* arguing that "solidarity means recognizing that all political authority exists to fulfill the common good of the whole human family."[241] Following this tradition by emphasizing participation, John Paul II argues that an authentic community is one of solidarity. He puts it thus: "solidarity is also the foundation of a community in which the common good conditions and liberates participation, and participation serves the common good, supports it and implements it."[242] As a virtue, the substantive meaning of solidarity includes not only

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[237] Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought*, 124.
[238] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.
[239] John XXIII, *Mother and Teacher – Mater et Magistra* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1961), no. 65.
[240] Ibid.
[241] Drew Christiansen, "Commentary on *Pacem in Terris,*" in *Modern Catholic Social Teaching: Commentaries and Interpretations*, eds. Kenneth R. Himes and et al., 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2018), 225.
[242] Karol Wojtyla, *Toward a Philosophy of Praxis* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 47.

political or social conditions but also a commitment to personal flourishing and participation in the universal common good.[243]

This characteristic of solidarity sheds light on our discussion in a few ways. First, as we explained earlier, by exercising solidarity, one feels a sense of responsibility for others, especially for the poor, the weak, and the marginalized. In solidarity with those people, we are able to become more fully human, more fully who we are. The exercise of solidarity helps us realize that our neighbor's dignity and rights are bound up with our own; our humanities are bound up in each other. Indeed, the necessary and tight connection between human rights and solidarity is based on a philosophical and theological anthropology of a community of equal human persons. Both human rights and solidarity flow necessarily from what it means to be a human created in *imago Dei*. Clark maintains that "the starting point for both human rights and solidarity is the human person."[244] The virtue of solidarity reminds us that each person, including an unborn child, is a human being whose dignity and right need to be protected and promoted. The first right of a human being is a right to life. Solidarity helps us to see the "other" as a person. Moreover, it is important to think about responsibilities that the family and the whole society should have for mothers who have to carry and take care of their children. Solidarity impels us to protect all people and to be a voice for women who are the victims of sexism, domestic and sexual abuse, and other social injustices.

Secondly, Clark contends that solidarity helps us to avoid "any form of collectivism in which persons are subsumed by the whole or subverted to it."[245] Cathleen Kaveny argues that

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[243] See Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought*, 110.
[244] Ibid., 44.
[245] Ibid., 34.

individual autonomy is ultimately a social achievement.[246] In other words, in the language of solidarity, there is no conflict between the good of each individual and that of community.

Thirdly, by practicing and building the virtue of solidarity, one comes to recognize that it is necessary to address the structural problems that human rights and human dignity violate. To assure conditions in which all people are able to become more fully human, human rights need to be protected and promoted. Because social sins or the structures of vice tend to be hidden and protected by both cultural and political powers, it is only in solidarity with the victims that one is able to identify those structures of vice and attempt to defeat them.

c. To be compassionate

In reality, it is easy to condemn women who have an abortion, but it seems more difficult to understand them and be compassionate toward their sufferings and frustrations. Clark contends that the true meaning of solidarity is demonstrated when one lets herself be changed by others' pains. She writes: "If your pain cannot change me and my pain cannot change you, then the relationship cannot be one of solidarity, even if basic needs are being met."[247] She goes on to say that "the virtue of solidarity and the praxis of human rights require your pain to change me. Participation in the humanity of one another is necessary."[248] Hence, it is important to ask how unjust structures in society have negatively impacted these women, and to what extent people are responsible for these injustices. Pope Francis, by being compassionate to these women, conceded to all priests the discretion to absolve the sin of abortion to those who seek forgiveness for it.[249] Following Pope Francis, Cristina Traina further

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[246] Cathleen Kaveny, *Law's Virtues: Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2012), 30.
[247] Ibid., 129.
[248] Ibid., 130.
[249] See Francis, "Letter of His Holiness Pope Francis According to Which an Indulgence Is Granted to the Faithful on the Occasion of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy,"

argues that women with unwanted pregnancies do need mercy for their moral failings but this mercy is incomplete without the compassionate commitment to address structural justices that solidarity implies.[250] She opts for a compassion that prophetically condemns and commits itself to undoing unjust circumstances that often force pregnant women into genuine moral dilemmas that demand repentance and absolution. Her insight shines a particular light on our discussion: faced with others' sufferings, as Catholics we are called not only to be merciful but also to involve ourselves in challenging any social and structural justice. In the context of the Vietnamese Church, although many Catholic individuals and institutions have been involved in the works of mercy, it is essential to understand that, according to CST, in its social and charity works, the Church is called not just to take care of victims but also to change the very structures that victimize them. Therefore, in my opinion, there is an urgent need for the Vietnamese Church to look beyond charitable projects under Church auspices. Thus, the Vietnamese Church needs to see if there are ways (maybe through civil society or local government) in which Catholics are influencing or could in the future influence social policy or nongovernmental efforts not only to "help" the poor but to empower the poor and the marginalized, to promote systemic change.

d. A call to conversion

As mentioned earlier, the practice of the virtue of solidarity helps one come aware of one's responsibility for the evil consequences of one's actions in the world. This sense of responsibility leads one to conversion, that is, a change of heart and mind, and a new way of existing in the world.[251] In other words, by the virtue of solidarity, one comes to acknowledge that "the sin of one's suffering is directly related to the sin of another's active complicity or

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[250] See Cristina L. H. Traina, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Unwanted Pregnancy, Mercy, and Solidarity," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 46, no.4 (2018), 660.
[251] See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.

indifference."[252] This sense of responsibility urges one to act in justice for the sake of the common good. A transformation of personal relationships leads to a change of structures at large. Along these lines, Dorr contends that "the virtue of solidarity transforms the interpersonal relationships of individuals with the persons around them. It causes the more powerful to feel responsible for those who are weak and makes them ready to share what they have with them."[253]

For Pope John Paul II, the conversion also includes the process of "growing awareness"[254] that is, a new, critical awareness of the interdependence of a people, groups of persons, nations, and continents. The process of conversion includes a raising of awareness, an increasingly critical perception of society, and a growing recognition of the structures of sin.[255] At the same time, as Charles E. Curran remarks, "to bring about a more just society, all people should recognize the need not only to change structures but also to change hearts."[256] He contends that, from a theological perspective, this basic change of heart is very important because the primary message of Jesus calls for repentance or change of heart. Without a change of heart, there will never be a change of structures. For John Paul II demonstrates, since we are a human family, each of us in some way is in solidarity with others. Because we, as members of society, benefit from participating in and sustaining unjust social structures that cause harm to others, each of us has responsibilities to address these structural evils. Once we recognize how structures of sin distort and harm human dignity, each member of the Church has to ask for the grace of conversion. Each should ask how we, individually and communally, contribute to and maintain social and structural injustices that harm others' rights and dignity as human

[252] Potter, "Solidarity as Spiritual Exercise: Accompanying Migrants at the US/Mexico Border," 836.
[253] Dorr, "Solidarity and Integral Human Development," 149.
[254] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 26.
[255] See ibid.
[256] Charles E. Curran, *Catholic Social Teaching, 1891- Present: A Historical, Theological, and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 46.

beings. This conversion needs to be practiced; for example, in solidarity with the 39 victims and as an expression of communal conversion, the Vietnamese Church called all her members to fast one day.

e. A way of peace

John Paul II proposes solidarity as a path to peace and to development.[257] Hence, it is hoped that solidarity will lead to the transformation of societal structures through the collaboration and participation of all individuals in a community. Consonant with the trend of the recent Magisterium, John Paul II refers to a societal change inspired by the spirit of pacifism. This also demonstrates that, at the core of solidarity is an ethic of hope – hope in the human person and her ability to choose good over evil. John Paul II trusts in the human ability to "conquer evil with goodness."[258] Although such an approach might be sometimes "accused of being too irenic, too willing to appease rather than accept conflict in the struggle for justice,"[259] it promotes a hopeful and pacifist way that leads to peace. Doran maintains that, for John Paul II, solidarity purifies struggles, ensuring that the struggle for human beings and their rights never becomes a struggle of one against another.[260] Solidarity does not aim at introducing structural change in a violent manner. People trust that if their solidarity is supported by the great majority of the population, those who hold power will be forced to resign or negotiate.[261]

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[257] See John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 39.
[258] Romans 12:21.
[259] Gerald Beyer, "Solidarity and Occupy Wall Street: A Tale of Two Movements," *Political Theology* 13, no.1 (2012), 9. Donal Dorr criticizes Pope John Paul II's account of solidarity as insufficiently prophetic, and "somewhat bland, since he offers no strong social analysis and less theological emphasis than liberationists do on the role of the poor in God's liberation." Donal Dorr, "Solidarity and Human Development," in *The Logic of Solidarity*, eds. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990), 141.
[260] See Doran, *Solidarity,* 214.
[261] See Baum, "Class Struggle and the Magisterium: A New Note," 699.

4. Some practical and pastoral implications

a. Social sin and conscience formation

The Vietnamese Church needs to be more active in her mission to form the conscience of the baptized, which in turn impacts the conscience of society as a whole. The Church fulfills this educational mission not only by her teachings but also by her witness. In chapter 1, we discovered how people's conscience may be ignored or blinded by social practices and traditions in which they participate. In this situation, Catholic teachings might serve as reminders to reflect the moral values that have been forgotten or ignored. In other words, Catholic Magisterium enables individuals to recognize the demands of the divine law through their conscience.

Regarding the responsibility of a moral agent, as we explained in chapter 1, it is important to be attentive to the communal aspect of conscience; to discuss and to emphasize the social dimension of sin call us to acknowledge the social impacts on one's conscience formation. As Cahill rightly points out, "conscience must be formed and educated communally, even as the self is also formed in community."[262] As I argued at the outset of this chapter, the emphasis on conscience formation of moral theology in the Vietnamese Church still reflect the individualistic, act-oriented approach of traditional moral theology. This approach, on the one hand, prevents us from realizing mitigating factors that lessen one's moral responsibility, and, on the other hand, neglects a social understanding of sin and fails to address social issues and structural injustices.

However, it is not true that the acknowledgment of the social dimension of sin leads to the elimination of all personal responsibility of one's moral agency. On the one hand, it is

[262] Cahill, "Catholic Commitment and Public Responsivity," 151.

necessary to free people from an exaggerated sense of guilt that may lead to sins.[263] On the other hand, aware of the existence of social sin, each of us is impelled to know that we are involved in many situations in which many people suffer because of unjust social structures. From the Catholic perspective, this complicity might be a result of direct or indirect cooperation in evil but could also be the result of omission or indifference. In many cases, an omission or indifference is also a sin against God and our neighbors. Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew reminds us that one will be judged based on what the person has done or has not done for others who are images of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God. Julie Hanlon Rubio contends that, once one begins to see how we are all involved, one can slowly make way into broader understandings not only of a person's innocence but of complicity.[264] In my opinion, it is important to keep ourselves in a dynamic tension between guilt and responsibility. By living in the tension between these two poles, I opt for a conscience formation that includes the integral development of moral character suggested by Gula in light of virtue ethics in which the virtue of prudence and solidarity play a vital role.[265] A mature conscience requires that a moral agent must be fully aware of the cause and effect of what she is doing. Therefore, conscience formation aims to assist women and men in making decisions based on their own mature independence and responsibility.

In solidarity with the poor and the marginalized, one's conscience will be awakened. I contend that, in solidarity with the victims, by letting ourselves be touched by others' pains, our indifference will be overcome. Bryan Massingale argues that, by using racism as a case study and by indicating the defects of two traditional approaches in conscience formation

[263] While guilt is a necessary "sign" by which one realizes what is wrong and comes to a conversion, an exaggerated sense of guilt leads moral agents to negative feelings such as resentment, anger, cynism that do harm to moral agents.
[264] See Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground*, 42.
[265] See Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith,* 136-162.

represented by Karl Peschke and Richard Gula, neither approach is adequate to the challenges raised by the reality of nonconscious racial bias.[266] Inspired by Joseph Feagin's insights, Massingale opts for a compassionate discomfort that would enable "consciences to overcome, or at least struggle against, culturally induced ethical blindness and indifference."[267] Here, Massingale rightly points out the vital role solidarity plays in conscience formation. I strongly agree with him that this approach overcomes the limits of the traditional approaches of conscience formation that have ignored, or at least taken lightly, the social dimension of conscience.

b. The role of the Christian community

To be realistic, the Vietnamese Church should be a creative minority working for what is truly the human good in her society. For a particular political situation, it is too optimistic for the Church to attempt to change society by getting involved in social and political spheres. I tend to be sympathetic to Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's view, that is, that the Church's role is to be true to herself.[268] She is not first and foremost a means for social progress; nor should the Church try to justify herself by her deeds of working for social reform.[269]

My proposals are also supported by more recent theological approaches that appeal to a local or perspective from below. In an attempt to propose a revised definition for the concept of the structure of sin by connecting the definition with moral psychology, Conor Kelly

[266] See Karl H. Peschke, *Christian Ethics: General Moral Theology, vol. 1, A Presentation of General Moral Theology in the Light of Vatican Council II* (Dublin: C. Goodliffe Neale, 1979), 244. See also Gula, *Reason Informed by Faith,* 137-139
[267] Bryan N. Massingale, "Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias," in *Conscience and Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities and Institutional Responses*, eds. David E. DeCosse and Kristin Heyer (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 53-68, at 67.
[268] Charles E. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology: Five Strands* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2013), 118-120; Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (New York: Basic, 2006), 80 and 120-27.
[269] Ibid.

maintains that "structures of sin do not need to be changed at the highest systemic levels,"[270] rather, "the strongest impacts on moral intuitions will come from the closest groups; combating the power of structural sin, then, can begin at the local level."[271] In a slightly different way, aware of the limited contribution of all Christians to serious social problems at the macro level, Rubio strongly appeals to another approach that encourages social change "less from above than from below."[272] Rubio's proposal reflects a diversity of ways of working for social reform suggested by CST before and after the Second Vatican Council.

As a Christian community, we are called to protect the life of an unborn child and the mother as well. Rubio rightly points out that the key to finding a credible answer lies in recognizing why women have abortions.[273] We recognize that, as we discussed in chapters 1and 2, choosing to have an abortion is not an easy decision and at times is tragic for many women. For that reason, besides addressing unjust structures that violate the right of an unborn child, it is essential to be compassionate and in solidarity with those women who are victims of domestic violence, crime, and sexual abuse. As Bilgrien writes, "If someone is suffering, it is a sign that solidarity is not being practiced."[274] It is important to understand how difficult and tragic it is for a woman who wants to keep her child but cannot do that due to the pressure of the family or society, or the suffering a woman faces when she must abort her unborn child due in part to her partner abandoning her and she cannot afford her own life on her own.

We discover that "women with unwanted pregnancies almost inevitably experience moral failure: they must compromise or ignore real, mutually exclusive moral obligations, whether they give birth and parent, give birth and give up custody, or seek abortions. This

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[270] Kelly, "The Nature and Operation of Structural Sin," 322.
[271] Ibid., 322.
[272] Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground*, 59.
[273] See ibid., 168.
[274] Bilgien, *Solidarity: A Principle, an Attitude, a Duty?,* 98

moral failure causes moral harm as well."[275] In my pastoral ministry, I have encountered women who suffered from their tragic experiences of abortion, both psychologically and spiritually. For this reason, beyond proclaiming the mercy of God through the sacrament of reconciliation as Pope Francis suggested, there is an urgent need for counsel, accompaniment, care, and love for these women. This assistance is almost entirely missing in the medical systems in Vietnam.[276] In response to this urgent need, some religious orders attempted to establish pastoral and psychological counseling centers where the young can find support, guidance, accompaniment, and even solutions for their issues. These initiatives are still very limited, however, and they should be an apostolic priority for some religious orders in their apostolic discernment.

Furthermore, the Church needs to establish good pastoral care that seeks a feasible way to help people to turn away from abortion. We should acknowledge that the Church's mission to protect life cannot be separated from the issue of supporting women and caring for children. In order to make this mission more effective, Church leaders must sufficiently address the causes that lead women to abortion and search for solutions. This implies that the Church at times must name unjust social customs and evil structures that suppress the integral development of human beings. Christopher Pramuk highlights the Church's responsibility to "effect positive transformation in society," not only because of our rich theological resources, but particularly because we "profess a commitment to human dignity and justice."[277] Baum rightly points out that it is the task of the Church "to make people aware of the obstacles that

[275] Traina, "Between a Rock and a Hard Place," 661.
[276] Annika Johansson and others highlight that abortion is presented in technical terms as a medical intervention. Ethical aspects of abortion and how they might be dealt with in counseling situations are not mentioned in the documents that they examine. See Johansson, et al., "Husbands' Involvement in Abortion in Vietnam," 407.
[277] Christopher Pramuk, "Imagination and Difference: Beyond Essentialism in Church Teaching and Practice," *New Theology Review* 26, no. 1 (2013): 47-48.

prevented them from exercising responsibility for their own lives."[278] At the same time, Catholic leaders ought to engage actively in cooperation with government, communal, and social services to find ways to promote a better life for mothers and families, and particularly affordable, qualify care for children.

The Church is able to change the world step by step because of the witness of the people of God. For example, in the mission of protecting and promoting the culture of life, many individuals and agencies, especially female religious congregations, establish and run many "receiving homes" in which they welcome, take care of, and help young women with unwanted pregnancies. Another example: a Catholic priest, Dong Nguyen, built a cemetery for aborted fetuses.[279] His aim in doing this is twofold: first, to express compassion and respect toward these unfortunate fetuses and, second, to remind young people and the parents to reflect on the values of life. Moreover, although some Catholic religious institutions are involved in taking care of the young women who experience unwanted pregnancies, I think that they should be more active in this mission. The importance of these engagements does not consist only in preventing young women from choosing to terminate their pregnancies. More than that, these activities should become a prophetic sign of a culture of life that the Church unceasingly promotes in a world which wants to support a culture of death. For Catholic doctors, pharmacists, nurses, and chaplains, their profession calls them to be guardians and servants of human life.[280] They have to become witnesses of the Gospel of life in their own lives and workplaces.

[278] Baum, "Class Struggle and the Magisterium: A New Note," 692.
[279] This is problematic and it does not conform to Catholic theology and liturgy because there is a difference between an unborn human life and born human beings in the Catholic view. However, this practice helps the Vietnamese be aware of the value of life and promotes the culture of solidarity and it shows respect for life, born and unborn.
[280] See John Paul II, *The Gospel of Life - Evangelium Vitae*, no. 89.

c. **Law and public policy**

It is not realistic to presume we can eliminate the legalization of abortion, especially in Vietnam's social and political situation. The experience from Vietnam and many other countries has demonstrated that "women who want abortions will find a way to obtain them."[281] That being said, it is necessary to rethink the language used in the current population law and to address public policies that support and promote traditional values of family and a better life for mothers and children.

Firstly, the government and lawmakers need to be more attentive to the language used in current population law. Here, the key passage that Thomas Aquinas quotes from Isidore of Seville is valuable for us: "Law shall be virtuous, just, possible to nature, according to the custom of the country, suitable to place and time, necessary, useful; clearly expressed, lest by its obscurity it lead to misunderstanding; framed for no private benefit but for the common good."[282] This quote articulates the range of qualities that good law must demonstrate. The last part of the statement clearly affirms that the law needs to be clear in its content and expression. Obscure and ambiguous terms and expressions need to be eliminated or changed appropriately. The requirement that the law be "according to the custom of the country" indicates that government officials should not use laws as a tool to implement their own vision of the perfect community, without any regard for the particular practices to which their subjects have become accustomed in living their lives.[283] Finally, inspired by Aquinas's realistic definition of law, Cathleen Kaveny sees law as a teacher of virtue that is ultimately more respectful of the dignity of the law's subjects than the "law as police officer" approach.[284] Kaveny argues that Aquinas

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[281] Rubio, *Hope for Common Ground*, 88.
[282] Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, q. 95, art. 3.
[283] See Kaveny, *Law's Virtues: Fostering Autonomy and Solidarity in American Society*, 30.
[284] See ibid., 49.

maintains that the aim of the law is to lead persons to virtue, to a state of flourishing.[285] Kaveny finds "ample evidence of how law can still function as a powerful moral teacher by holding up a compelling, integrated vision of our common life that inspires people to move beyond its strict requirements."[286] This insight shines a light on the situation in Vietnam where the language of virtue, not law, has been deeply rooted in the culture and tradition of the country. Lawmakers need to be attentive to the pedagogical dimension of law.

Secondly, the language of rights has its own strength and significance, and in the future, Vietnamese theological morality should appeal to it as a synergic force. Yet, under the dictatorship of the communist government, the language of rights seems to be less effective, and more "political,"[287] hence riskier than the language of virtues. In this regard, the insight of Daniel Daly about the structure of virtue and structure of vice built up in the concept of virtuous dimension of law in Kaveny's sense is very relevant for the Vietnamese situation.[288] On the one hand, this approach is supported by Vietnamese cultural and traditional values that have been deeply assimilated into the language of virtue and, on the other hand, such an approach avoids the risk of being identified as a political action.

Thirdly, there is an urgent need for governments in seeking public policies to support parents and children. The goal of a high-quality life is not attainable just by attempting to control the increase of the population. To attain sustainable development for each individual and the whole country, the government needs to reform public policies so that human dignity

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[285] See ibid.
[286] Ibid., 65.
[287] The Vietnamese government's unease with human rights, particularly with religious freedom, and its suppression of those who dare to struggle for truth and justice, hinder the humanization and true progress of the Vietnamese society, expose the moral limitation of the government system, and finally fail to complete the task of governance. See Y-Lan Tran, "Vietnam in Transition: Theological and Ethical Challenges," in *Transformative Theological Ethics: East Asian Contexts,* ed. Agnes M. Brazal (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2010), 46.
[288] See Daly, "Structures of Virtue and Vice."

and human rights are protected and promoted, especially those of women, children, and the elderly. For example, some scholars argue that, because the government's free medical care for the poor and the elderly is provided in a very limited way, the elderly traditionally must rely on their sons. This social structural defect may lead to a preference for having a male-child.[289] Moreover, to counteract sexism, the government needs to provide better education for women and more employment opportunities by which women's dignity and status are recognized, protected, and promoted. Finally, in the cultural and traditional context, the voice of women has not been listened to in many realms of social life. We should bring women's needs, interests, and experiences into these debates and make their wellbeing the focus of policies aimed at tackling sex-selective abortion. For example, the silence surrounding sex-selective abortion remains a major challenge for individuals and society.

In short, this chapter pointed out how it is possible and fruitful to utilize the resources of the Thomistic tradition on virtue to elucidate solidarity as a virtue. Solidarity, from a Thomistic perspective, is a moral, personal, and social virtue that needs to be exercised and built up in community life. By exercising the virtue of solidarity, we are able to become more fully human, more fully who we are. In solidarity with others, by entering into the chaos of others, we grow in the capacity to love and accept others. By letting others' pain change our hearts and minds, we are able to understand, to be compassionate, and to act to eliminate all evils that cause these harms. In line with Clark, Hollenbach, and others, I contend that in SRS, although solidarity is a virtue that inclines us to good relations with others and service to the common good, in one way or another, it is more personal, affective, and intimate than justice.[290] Moreover, as a social virtue, solidarity is closely linked to justice; however, it surpasses the

[289] See Minh Hang Tran, *Global Debates, Local Dilemmas Sex-selective Abortion in Contemporary Viet Nam* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 2018), 192.
[290] See Clark, *The Vision of Catholic Social Thought*, 123.

demands of justice in order to find a better life condition for others. In my view, the virtue of solidarity needs to be accompanied by other virtues such as justice, fortitude, and charity. For example, in *Centesimus Annus*, John Paul II implicitly links the virtue of fortitude with solidarity when he contends that "only such an awareness can give the courage needed to face the risk and the change involved in every authentic attempt to come to the aid of another."[291]

Moreover, as noted above, solidarity may be found and appreciated in many different cultures and traditions. This confirmation opens the possibility of collaboration and dialogue between Catholics and all people of good will. All human beings are called to work for the common good because we all share a common humanity. Doran rightly contends that "dialogue and participation are undertaken, in solidarity, on the basis that to be an 'other' person is good, and to be and act with the 'other' adds to the total of goodness."[292]

In my view, the virtue of solidarity is a good way to address personal and social moral problems in Vietnam. The language of virtue is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese tradition and culture. In addition, in the long course of its history, many narratives fostered the spirit of solidarity in this country. The question is how to rediscover the value and meaning of narratives in Vietnamese culture that encourage this virtue. As our study has pointed out, in order to build a culture that cultivates and promotes the virtue of solidarity, it is essential to promote and protect human rights, to help each to realize that we share a common humanity. Building solidarity and practicing human rights requires seeing the people in front of me first. Solidarity and human rights are realized through human encounters and not in the abstract.

[291] John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus* (1991), no. 58; cf. Bilgrien, *Solidarity*, 149.
[292] Doran, *Solidarity,* 242.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is of great importance to address a moral problem such as abortion in Vietnam. Indeed, this evil not only deprives the life of an innocent child but also does harm to the moral agency of women who suffered from their tragic experiences of abortion, both psychologically and spiritually. Our analysis also demonstrates that the origin of this issue is complicated and multifaceted, both personally and structurally. This reality demands that we address the problem from a broader perspective. Therefore, being faithful to her mission of protection of life, the Vietnamese church, beyond proclaiming the gospel of life indefatigably and showing her merciful love and care for women who have abortions, needs to address social and structural issues that play a vital role in this picture.

To fulfill this mission, in the spirit of the virtue of solidarity, it is necessary to gather the strengths of all people of goodwill. For this reason, within Vietnam, it is important to promote the culture of encounter and collaboration among all people. As we pointed above, the virtue of solidarity is deeply rooted in the Vietnamese tradition and culture. Moreover, dialogue is needed and it requires the virtues of faith, courage, humility, respect, and charity. Through such a dialogue, the Church can understand, learn, and collaborate with people of other religions. This should be a hallmark of Catholic social teaching, now and in the future. It also is important to learn how to collaborate between Catholics and Christians of other denominations. In Vietnam, Christians who belong to other denominations are still a very minor group and at times they have struggled with Catholics over misunderstandings that come from both sides.

Finally, our analysis also leads us to question the application of Catholic social teaching (CST) in the Vietnamese church. Clearly, CST has strongly encouraged Christians to be involved in social and political transformation. Unfortunately, this mission cannot equally

succeed in every corner of the world. From the outset, we noticed that Catholic social teaching is still alienated in the Vietnamese context due to the complicated sociopolitical situation and the particular focus of moral formation both in seminaries and schools of theology. Due to these limits, other questions emerge and they should be addressed in future projects: Why has CST remained on the margins of theological discourses and training in the Vietnamese Church? Has it been so because the Catholic church in Vietnam has not attempted to implement CST in the local church or because the Vietnamese church finds that CST is, in some ways, irrelevant to the particular situation in Vietnam? I think both possibilities are partly true. These questions call us to consider the need for updating and inculturating Catholic social teaching. It is clear that Catholic social teaching, in other parts of the world, from the outset has created a robust, active, and fruitful participation of Christians in social and political spheres. By considering the diversity of social, political, and economic realities in different countries further implementation and developments will be possible.

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