

# **D.C. symposium explores common morality in a global age**

WASHINGTON - A quest for a common morality in the world's diverse cultures can begin with a mother's smile and her child's play, Cardinal Angelo Scola of Venice, Italy, said March 27 as The Catholic University of America opened a four-day international symposium, "A Common Morality for the Global Age."

The Venice patriarch, a theology professor before he was made a bishop, delivered the keynote address for the symposium in Washington, which drew more than 200 participants.

The subtitle for the event, "In Gratitude for What We Are Given," set a theme that resonated with scholars of Judaism, Islam and Eastern religions who were among the speakers.

The gathering was the result of a request to Catholic University from Pope Benedict XVI in October 2004, before he became pope. It drew thinkers from several religious traditions and experts in philosophy, theology, ethics, politics and religion from several nations.

In requesting the symposium the future pope - then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith - wrote: "The Catholic Church has become increasingly concerned by the contemporary difficulty in finding a common denominator among the moral principles held by all people, which are based on the constitution of the human person and which function as the fundamental criteria for law, affecting the rights and duties of all."

Cardinal Scola said a starting point for such a common moral ground might be found in the observation of the late Swiss theologian Father Hans Urs von Balthasar that the play of a child "offers us a paradigm of the experience of 'being freely welcomed' into life."

"In his play, the child expands the smile received from the mother into an attitude of trust towards the world, her smile constituting for him the relation that protects him

and makes him capable of experience,” he said.

He said this provides an entry point for answering the question, “Does each person have an elementary moral experience?”

The cardinal, a specialist in theological anthropology, sexuality, marriage and family life, delivered his address by video because a scheduling conflict prevented him from attending the symposium in person.

He said that understanding the authentic nature of morality must start with each person’s “elementary experience of the good” – which he said is relational in character.

“The child’s play reveals his desire ... that the world be welcoming to him, harmonious, rich with possibilities to be discovered and utilized,” he said.

“At the same time, however, it reveals that this desire is supported by a recognition that stimulates, reassures and supports him,” he added. “It is by virtue of the recognition he has received that the child entertains relations of trust with the world and with other subjects, that the child is made capable of positive stable relationships, relations of communion with others and with all reality.”

The triad of desire for self-fulfillment, of recognition and of communion can be viewed as an example of the structure of the moral experience itself, he suggested.

He said the Gospel story of Jesus and the rich young man also highlights the relational character of morality. The man asks Jesus what he must do to gain eternal life. When Jesus tells him to keep the commandments, he says he already does so but wonders what more he should do. Jesus tells him to give everything he has to the poor and “come follow me.”

Cardinal Scola noted that in the exchange Jesus shifts the question of good – from what is good to who is good – when he says, “There is one alone who is good.”

“The heart of the question is not the observance of the rules, but the fulfillment of the desire for the good that makes us sensitive to them. ... Jesus invites the rich young man to discover the nexus between the good and relationship,” the cardinal

said.

In introducing the symposium Vincentian Father David M. O'Connell, the university's president, quoted from Cardinal Ratzinger's letter, saying the future pope saw the symposium topic he proposed as a good starting point for the church's dialogue with the world, with significant ecumenical, intercultural and interreligious dimensions.

Organizing the symposium was William J. Wagner, a law professor at Catholic University and founder and director of the university's Center for Law, Philosophy and Culture. He said the proceedings of the symposium are to be published in the center's Journal of Law, Philosophy and Culture.