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Yin, Ming

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# VIRTUE: CATHOLIC HUMANISM IN THE *CONSILIUM DE EMENDANDA ECCLESIA*

Ming Yin<sup>1</sup>


**Abstract:** How to view the reform of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century and its relationship with virtue as an important issue in studying humanist philosophy. Humanists emphasize that virtue education is the foundation for cultivating personality and believe restoring the virtues of the church is the “cure” for the ills of the early modern church. *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia* (1537) is the Catholic humanists’ practice of virtue. This is reflected in proposals to strengthen educational norms and socio-moral disciplines and emphasize perfecting clerical virtue as the driving force for reform. In addition, under the guidance of virtue ethics, virtue politics becomes the guiding ideology of those humanists’ political practice, where they recognize the Pope’s authority and the one of the Church, associating virtue with the legitimacy of power. The virtue philosophy in *Consilium* forms the ideological foundation for the Reformation of the Catholic Church. The ancient Chinese scholar Dong Zhongshu (179-104 B.C.) practiced a similar politics of virtue. In *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, he combined the legitimacy of rule with virtue based on the kings’ divine right, thus perpetuating the Confucian concept of the “sage”. Both Catholic humanists and Dong emphasized the importance of the rulers’ virtue as agents of God.

**Keywords:** Virtue. Catholic humanism. Catholic Reform. Virtue politics. Dong Zhongshu.

## INTRODUCTION

In the study of early modern European history, humanism profoundly influences modern Europe. Under this narrative, humanism is portrayed as the representation of secularization, characterized by criticism of depravity of the Catholic Church and opposition to papal authority (JOHN, 2016, p. 5-20). However, the concept of “humanism” has many ambiguities

<sup>1</sup> World History Department, Shanghai Normal University, Shanghai 200234 – China.

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8003-6596>. Email: 1000497826@mail.shnu.edu.cn.

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(ZIMMERMANN, 2017, p. 2-10). The rise of theories such as evolution, astronomy and atomism, in the nineteenth century, led to the widespread interpretation of “humanism” as secular humanism (an atheistic conception of man as the measure of man). In contrast, Christian humanism, which was introduced in the twentieth century, began with Christ’s moral teachings and followed religious beliefs (affirming that human beings are created in God’s image, which is the basis of personal values). Even so, the use of Christian humanism to explain the Reformation of the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century is prone to ambiguity, as it is difficult to distinguish among the humanists’ positions concerning the Roman Church. This thesis intends to use the term “Catholic humanism” to further summarize the humanists such as Erasmus and Contarini - who insisted on preserving the purity of the Church through the Reformation while also affirming the “connecting” role of the Church and embracing papal supremacy. Protestants who deny the part of the Church are called “Protestant humanists”.

Clarifying the concept of “Catholic humanism” and understanding their reformist philosophy of virtue will play an essential role in furthering the study of the Catholic Reformation in the sixteenth century. With the rise of the Reformation, “Catholic humanism” became not only a philosophical idea but also a practice of political thought. Both “Protestant” and “Christian” humanists skillfully adopt Greek and Latin for literature creation, which is fundamentally aimed at practicing their thoughts and achieving the agenda of promoting their moral philosophy and values. Therefore, this paper intends to start with the 16th-century church reform document *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, interpret the early modern Catholic humanists’ thoughts through textual analysis and explore how this “prescription” for diagnosing the Church connects their discursive vision of virtue with concrete reform initiatives. In addition, the past tendencies, such as emphasizing the secular nature of humanism and highlighting people-oriented and individualist ideas, also attracted considerable criticism in the field of virtue in the 20th century, which makes it worthwhile to return to early modern Europe to re-examine the connotation of “humanism”.

## 1 THE CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE AND THE CATHOLIC HUMANIST

In Christianity, virtue can refer to any of the seven virtues (prudence, temperance, fortitude, justice, faith, hope and love) that constitute the basis

of Christian ethics, as well as “[...] living and acting in accordance with moral principles.” (Virtue is the practical attitude and habit of following these principles). In particular, FAITH, HOPE and LOVE, because of their relationship with God, have the potential to become far more truly virtuous than anyone who does not know God ever could (THOMAS, 1990, p. 60-61).

## **1.1 CORE: ON VIRTUES**

It is important to emphasize that the virtues mentioned in this paper are not the virtue ethics that has emerged in recent decades. This “revival” of virtue theory focuses on the person behind the action rather than the content and consequences. The philosophy of virtue is appealing because it goes beyond the traditional dichotomy between deontological ethics and consequentialism. It appears to have the best of both worlds: it agrees with consequentialism that the criterion of an action being morally right or wrong lies in its relation to an end that has intrinsic value; but, more closely, it resembles deontological ethics in its view that morally right actions are constitutive of the end itself and not mere instrumental means to the end (BRITANNICA, 2022).

Yet the combination of the two means that ambiguity can easily arise because virtue cannot be articulated in the abstract in isolation from the reality of the ethical life in which an individual lives. Although there are different research perspectives, the various strands of virtue ethics are agent-based (Slote), target-centred (Swanton) and Neo-Aristotelian (Annas) attempts to focus on abstract virtue itself (SNOW, 2018, p. 491-507). It is also somewhat anachronistic to use the new nineteenth-century theory to explain the Catholic Reformation in the sixteenth-century context.

It is, therefore, essential to make clear that the definition of virtue in this paper is based on a Christian ethical perspective, especially in the context of the Catholic Reformation of the sixteenth century, and is derived from the ideological conception of Catholic humanists’ “virtue”. At the time of the Reformation, the concept of virtue in this paper was not only a purely moral concept but also a political ideal in the Catholic humanists’ hands who were actively involved in the Reformation.

The conception of virtue was first introduced by Plato’s “Cardinal virtues” and Socrates’s “Virtue is knowledge”. Later in the Middle Ages, the

conception was supplemented by Thomas Aquinas and Augustine based on Christian scholasticism (SCHMITT, 1988, p. 304-306). St. Thomas Aquinas provided the most careful consideration of the virtues from a theological perspective in his *Summa Theologiae* and his *Commentaries on Nicomachean Ethics*. It is believed that man can only be wholly saved in God and that man cannot fully know God by his own natural abilities alone as a rational finite being. Therefore, divine revelation must make certain truths beyond human reason known to us. Thus, Aquinas proposes a theological virtue in addition to the natural virtue, pointing to the virtue of divine grace infused into human beings.

## 1.2 THE CHANGING CONCEPTION OF VIRTUE AMONG CATHOLIC HUMANISTS

Although the themes of philosophical reflection during the Renaissance were increasingly concerned with human power, freedom and achievement, this did not mean a sudden shift to atheism (secular humanism); in contrast, most Renaissance thinkers remained Christians. Despite their different positions on the Church, the vast majority of Christian humanists recognized the necessity of virtue, especially when they tacitly acknowledged that the health of the body politic possessed the same character as the moral health of the head. Yet no one is born a virtuous person, and one becomes a virtuous person, in their view, not by revelation or recollection, nor by understanding certain rules, but through education (LINES; EBBERSMEYER, 2013, p. 310-312). The classical political philosophers regarded the man's education as the education of the soul, the education of virtue, and the purpose of education is to produce good people with excellent souls.

This further summarizes the two stages of the Renaissance Catholic humanists' understanding of "virtue". The first was Petrarch's attempt in the 14th century to restore Cicero's definition of virtue. Petrarch's interpretation of "virtue" is embodied in the educational value based on rhetoric and philosophy. In *Tusculan Disputations*, Cicero mentions, "It is the word man (Vir) that the word virtue (Virtue) is from." (SCHMITT, 1988, p. 195). The concept of virtue at this time focused on the cultivation and education of man. By reviving the classical view, early humanists proposed that the study of virtue philosophy is core to the cultivation of a true man and his personality. Virtue philosophy is inseparable from rhetoric. Mastery of writing not only

helps philosophers to spread their theories but also to exert influence on public affairs (QUENTIN, 1978, p. 88).

The second transformation was by Catholic humanists led by Erasmus. Unlike Protestant humanists, Catholic humanists believed that it was necessary for the Roman Church to regulate its citizens' moral life and maintain the purity of the Church (JUSTO, 1971, p. 239); moreover, moral ethics, like law, was a means to achieve good social governance. While they drew on Aquinas' view of virtue, they were generally conservative and lacked philosophical breakthroughs, although they were more tolerant of Aristotle and other "pagan" ideas. This is not to say that the Catholic humanists were simply repeating St. Thomas' views, but that they placed more emphasis on the realization of the ideal of the unity of the Christian nation, relegating political differences to a secondary position through their religious fellowship. It is obvious that one is first a Christian and then an Englishman or a Burgundian (SOUTHGATE, 1955, p. 245). In the 16th century, this active form of virtue signified strength, forcefulness, and the ability to persuade, even coerce, to obtain the desired outcome. Quality of political rather than moral virtue was deemed essential for the ruling class, as it put pragmatism to work for the good of the commonwealth (or for the ruler) (SINCLAIR, 2020, p. 140).

Meanwhile, in theology, Catholic humanist scholars inherited the classical political philosophy of the Middle Ages — upholding the ultimate, authoritative virtue and unified value standards, they are more focused on the belief in human freedom, individual conscience and unimpeded rational inquiry that is consistent with Christian practice and even the intrinsic characteristics of its doctrine. It represents a philosophical combination of Christian beliefs and classical humanist principles: "Virtue is an end in itself and constitutes its own reward." (BEJCZY, 2009, p. 105). Catholic humanist scholars have witnessed the disrepute of the Roman Church and its precarious position as the "key" connecting man to God due to corruption. Catholic humanist scholars have attributed these "ills" to greed and moral degradation in the face of lust and have argued that the papal selling indulgences violate the power of God (LINDSAY, 1906, p. 512).

When Catholic humanists, such as Contarini, confronted the ecclesiastical crisis of the sixteenth century, the humanists' writings were filled with fierce rhetoric and classical historical idea. In insisting on the leadership of the Church and the Pope, Catholic humanists believed that by purifying Rome, that is, reforming and regulating the virtuous life of the Christian

Church, the whole world would be purified with it (*purga Romam, purgatur mundus*). To restore the church to purity and virtue, Catholic humanists attributed the corruption and depravity of the church to the lack of virtue. This was reflected in their reform opinions, speeches and homilies of the papal court (O'REILLY, 1977, p. 166-204). Among them, the speeches of The Fifth Lateran Council and *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia* are the most outstanding and concentrated embodiment of Catholic humanism (JOHN, 1983, p. 220). Catholic humanists devoted much of their energy to reforming the church and restoring spiritual life through humanistic education and were highly critical of the corruption witnessed in the church. They further combined the pagan philosophers' greatest morals, such as Cicero and Seneca, with Christian interpretations derived from the study of the Bible and the Fathers. However, their criticism of the state of the universal church and the Curia, as well as their appeal to the clergy to improve the individuals, were also applied to the moral reform of society.

### 1.3 MORAL NORMS IN THE CATHOLIC REFORMATION

Under Erasmus' influence, virtue thus became the source of value for the new humanistic moral norms, thereby realizing the perfect combination of humanism and Christian theology, highlighting an extended norm of virtue from the individual to society.

Among the reformers of the Catholic Church, Catholic humanists formed a small but influential group whose reform plan was a logical extension of the emphasis on virtue in humanist rhetoric. Those humanists who criticized the religious life of the time (i.e. the sixteenth century) for being less than pure wished to follow secular procedures and sought the reform model of the Classical Age. The only difference was that the godfathers of the church replaced the ancient pagans like Plato. Due to their knowledge of Christian history and the ideal homage to the Patristic thinkers, many Catholic humanists condemned their contemporaries, especially the clergy, for their extravagant, religiously indifferent and anti-doctrinal lifestyles. As Cardinal Cosimo Orsini said, "Rome is a place not worth mentioning, where the unworthy are promoted, and the dissolute are sheltered." (JOHN, 1983, p. 222). Church reformation ideas complemented the Renaissance humanists' individualistic moral interests, embracing a more modest and apostolic lifestyle, and renouncing extravagant spending. While not all humanists departed from

advocating individual moral improvement to reforming Christian society as a whole, the vast majority of them insisted on virtue-guided reform.

In the summer of 1536, Pope Paul III appointed Gasparo Contarini to establish a reform committee tasked with drafting proposals for comprehensive reform for the forthcoming ecumenical council at Mantua. Meanwhile, Contarini was also authorized to seek and recommend to the Pope prominent reformists to serve on the Reform Council. At Contarini's invitation, Gian Pietro Carafa, Jacopo Sadoletto, Reginald Pole, Federigo Fregoso, Girolamo Aleandro, Gian Matteo Giberti, Gregorio Cortese and Tommaso Badia joined the committee. On December 22 of the same year, Pope Paul III awarded the title of Cardinal to Carafa, Pole, Sadoletto, Aleandro and others in the Reform Council (JOS, 2000, p. 50-60). Up to this point, Catholic humanists showed up in the College of Cardinals as a reformist group, which indeed possessed certain strength despite not being in a predominant number. The "secularization" of the Cardinals, which had grown increasingly pervasive since Pope Sixtus IV, began to be suppressed.

On March 9, 1537, nine clerics headed by Gasparo Contarini presented their jointly drafted reform plan to Pope Paul III, which ushered in the reform of the Holy See. The reform plan, historically named *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia* (hereinafter referred to as "*Consilium*"), is not only an essential document in the 16th-century Catholic reform movement but also a concentrated reflection of the Catholic humanists' reform ideas under the philosophy of virtue.

## 2 VIRTUE IN CONSILIVM DE EMENDANDA ECCLESIA

The Catholic humanists' virtue places consistent emphasis on the need to apply Christian virtue to all areas of life, public and private. Based on a rediscovery of ancient Greek texts, they believed that a learned and virtuous ruler would guide his state to peace and stability, provided he could remain above the squabbling and corruption of his court politics (SKINNER, 2002, p. 217). Thomas More, in the same era, speaks to this decline of the ruling class in Utopia, saying: "[...] rather than being able to do any good, you find yourself among colleagues who are easily able to corrupt even the best of men before reforming themselves." (QUENTIN, 2002, p. 221). *Consilium* was the "remedy" prescribed by Catholic humanists for the crisis in the Roman Curia. Reformers not only pointed out any dereliction of duty of the church but

also raised specific reform proposals. Its content can be divided into three parts. First, the Pope's failure to set an example is the root cause of the moral degradation and loss of virtue of the church. Second, the bishop's long absence from diocesan service and the abuse of the diocesan clergy's patronage and immunity are concrete manifestations of a lack of virtue. Third, appointing competent clergy and training qualified and morally educated priests is one of the most effective ways to reverse the degeneration of the church.

### 3.1 THE ADMONITIONS TO THE POPE

*Consilium* points out the previous popes' moral deficiencies in its opening chapter:

Indeed, those most serious diseases, which now for a long time afflict God's Church and especially this Roman Curia and which have now led with these diseases gradually becoming more troublesome and destructive to this great ruin which we see. And your Holiness, taught by the Spirit of God who (as Augustine says) speaks in hearts without the din of words, had rightly acknowledged that the origin of these evils was because some popes, your predecessors. (JOHN, 1969, p. 182-197).

Contarini and others believed that the lack of "virtue" among the clergy led to the emergence of greed and, ultimately, the Papacy's abandonment of Christian virtue. The absence of virtue started with popes and cardinals and was later spread to the common believers. As God's steward on earth, the Pope should pay more attention to orphans and widows and engage in personal charitable acts and public sermons wherever the conditions permit. At the same time, seminaries ought to be established to maintain the virtues and values of Christianity, guide the young in conducting more religious practices, and avoid disputes over theological issues. But the Pope devoted too much energy to worldly affairs. His role as the lord of the Papal State surpassed his responsibilities as the Pope of Catholicism and bishop of Rome, the latter being of paramount importance. The Reformed Catholic humanists, in their opinion, drawing on Aristotle and Aquinas, once again proved the irrationality and moral error of the argument that the Pope's will is the law. In *Consilium*, Contarini argued that the erroneously established the Pope's "absolute" power (the Pope's desire is the law) is a type of idolatry and a grave violation of the Christian virtues of "humility" and "faith."

Thence it came about, besides the fact that flattery follows all dominion as the shadow does the body and that truth's access to the ears of princes has always been most difficult, that teachers at once appeared who taught that the Pope is the lord of all benefices and that therefore, since a lord may sell by right what is his own, it necessarily follows that the Pope cannot be guilty of simony. Thus the will of the Pope, of whatever kind it may be, is the rule governing his activities and deeds: whence it may be shown without doubt that whatever is pleasing is also permitted. From this source, as from a Trojan horse, so many abuses and such grave diseases have rushed in upon the Church of God that we now see her afflicted almost to the despair of salvation, and the news of these things spread even to the infidels... (JOHN, 1969, p. 185)

Under the theory of “absolute” power, Pope’s energy was scattered and, as a result, many “servants” were needed for him to take proper care of the Church of Christ. The Pope can only exercise his stewardship through these servants, who are essential to all the clergymen, especially priests and bishops, endowed with divine status. Therefore, if the church is to function properly, it must stay tuned to whether these servants possess the qualification required for their positions: observe the divine commandment to attain the virtues of FAITH, HOPE and LOVE. On the contrary, many clergies lack the virtue of self-control and act or think contrary to God’s commands in the face of strong temptations.

### 3.2 CLERGY CRITICISM AND REFORMED CHURCH ORGANIZATION

The first abuse in this respect is the ordination of clerics and especially of priests, in which no care is taken, no diligence employed, so that indiscriminately the most unskilled, men of the vilest stock and of evil morals, adolescents, are admitted to Holy Orders ..... From this has come innumerable scandals and contempt for the ecclesiastical order, and reverence for divine worship has not only been diminished but has almost by now been destroyed. Therefore, we think that it would be an excellent thing if your Holiness first in this city of Rome appointed two or three prelates, learned and upright men, to preside over the ordination of clerics. (JOHN, 1969, p. 188).

Regarding the ordination, *Consilium* criticises in harsh terms the ordination of clergy without virtue. These undeserving ordinates neglected pastoral care and lacked pastoral competence. Not only did they slack off

and not live in the parish they were responsible for, but they also practiced simony. The scandal that all of this caused to the Papacy led directly to Luther questioning the validity of the existence of the Church. In fact, the drawback of the clergy's ordination is often closely associated with the issues of salaries and virtue education. Christians' overcoming of their limitations is a positive factor in their pursuit of salvation. In Christian ethics, they must strive to behave in a virtuous way, as virtue is not only knowledge but also a guide to conduct. Virtue enables self-knowledge and helps one realize his flaws before overcoming them. One can realize that he is corruptible and despicable, while he is also able to perceive that he has an immortal soul. This is the embodiment of virtue. However, under secularization, the clerics lack supervision and have very low moral requirements for themselves, which leads to chaos in the church.

Unlike the scholastics, who have been concerned with abstract concepts since the Middle Ages, Catholic humanists attend more to people in society and their moral needs, and believe that a man has a wholesome personality only when he is virtuous. They hope to restore the purity of the church by virtue of education. How to cultivate virtuous clergy is the most concerned reform issue for Catholic humanists. Humanism combined with classical virtues, in the Reformers' view, would deepen faith in God and fulfill the benevolence that the Church has always insisted on. According to virtue philosophy, love is the most sacred. Love herein involves both the love of the world and the love for God.

Therefore, in terms of moral matters, the virtues of the world are inferior to those related to God's laws, which fully manifests the theological hue of the virtue philosophy of Catholic humanism. It is for this very reason that man's pursuit of virtue is not hindered by innate conditions. A Christian's love for God or others will never be affected, even if he is ugly, disabled, or even paralyzed. That is, according to the Catholic humanists' virtue ethics, everyone can attain the ultimate and highest virtue as long as he remains morally and religiously devout. Guided by the Church, virtue will help him resist all kinds of temptation, stay firm in his own heart and never yield to self-interest.

In *Consilium*, Gasparo Contarini *et al.* point out that one of the crises of the Church is that some cunning priests have appropriated the public property of the Church through benefices exchanges for their families' self-interests (JOHN, 1969, p. 189-191). This behavior betrays the original

purpose of church property which is to be preserved for the benefit of all rather than anyone's private possession: "That nothing has stirred up more this ill-will toward the clergy, whence so many quarrels have arisen, and others threaten, than this diversion of ecclesiastical revenues and income from the general to private advantage." (JOHN, 1969, p. 190).

To normalize the organizational structure of the church, *Consilium* sets strict rules for orders and schools. The loose or less strict branches of the religious order are abolished, and more sophisticated pious orders, such as the Theatines, Capuchins and Jesuits, are established. Catholic humanists oppose dogmatic scholasticism but respect theologians' status in the ecclesiastical pedagogical tradition, emphasizing their value as traditional preachers and interpreters of Christian truth. The Reformers implicitly defend their right to interpretation of "orthodox" doctrine of the Christianity through virtue education in orders and schools. On the contrary, this forms the basis of Luther's attack on the "vision of traditional culture" of the Church put forward by Roman humanists, including the philosophy of virtue. Luther proved his piety by disavowing the centuries of authority of the Holy See. In the Catholic humanists' view, he arbitrarily excluded all post-Augustinian theologians from the authority of the church, thereby undermining the continuity of Christian doctrine (JOHN, 1983, p. 206).

Overall, the authors of *Consilium* highlight the lack of virtue among the clergy, represented by bishops, in the Church. They hope to achieve the objectives of reforming the church and purifying the Curia by dint of external ecclesial hierarchy and internal ecclesiastical humanistic education. Concretely, when analyzing the issue of the grant of clergy and benefice, Catholic humanists believe that its main cause lies in the bishops' corruption, which is still attributed to the lack of virtue. From the perspectives of strict control of philosophical thoughts and strengthening of bishops' right as rectors to restrict the orders and oversee the activities of the orders, *Consilium* discusses the disadvantages of religious schools and orders in sufficient detail. In addition to rebuking and lamenting the common believers' religious life, Contarini *et al.* emphasize that the clergy's transformation is the basis for the common believers' transformation. In other words, the practice of personal virtue should be applied to the reform of collective social virtue.

### 3 VIRTUE POLITICS: CATHOLIC HUMANISM AND DONG ZHONGSHU

Eastern and Western theologians linked virtue to politics through theories of divine right to consolidate the legitimacy of rule. They used admonitions writings to explain to rulers that only virtuous leaders - who elevated themselves to virtue and learning - became the spiritual leaders of all (the faithful). The similarities between Confucian and Catholic approaches to the politics of virtue, as exemplified by the Catholic humanists' *Consilium* and Dong Zhongshu's *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, help us to better understand the practice of virtue.

Ever since the classical era, the phenomenon of abuse of public power for private gain has occurred in any type of political community. Ancient China and the papal states of early modern Europe were no exception. In this regard, Catholic humanists did not end up resorting to divine law to define what "public" is and what "private" is, as medieval theologians did. Rather than searching for concepts in the Bible, they are more interested in tracing back to ancient history and classical writings to unveil the deeper cause of political corruption and moral depravity of the Roman Church in the 16th century. Since Petrarch, humanists have been confounded by the following questions: How to address the abuse of power by the clergy? How can the church be ensured to prioritize the "common good" over its private interests or the few ones' interests? How can "kindness" be made to replace the fear of legal punishment and how can believers be made more obedient to the authority of the church? It is no exaggeration to argue that "virtue politics" is the solution to these problems faced by Catholic humanists, and their efforts to instill political virtue bear political logic.

In the face of the rulers' unrestricted power, Dong Zhongshu also emphasizes the influence of virtue on politics. In his *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, he not only argues for the legitimacy of the kings' divine right through the claim that emperors (also known as the Son of Heaven) are the ones with "heaven", but also stresses the need for rulers to sense the "heavenly" virtues and dissolve them in themselves. Through the ruler's tangible body (his behavior), the people can learn from him the invisible virtues of "heaven". Once a ruler's behavior is contrary to virtue, he loses legitimacy, and this moral discipline helps to perpetuate the Confucian sage emperor's sage. Similarly, Contarini wrote *A Duty to the Bishops* to express his conviction that the Christian people's moral and religious foundation is a

higher endeavor than the task of secular government. Their eternal salvation depends on their acceptance and understanding of the Christian message.

First, Catholic humanists acknowledge the Pope's authority and the one of the Curia. While Catholic humanists slam the Pope and the Church for their "degenerate" behavior, they still perceive the Church of Rome and the Pope as the inheritor and guardian of the secular and religious values of Rome. The Pope and the Church are the bridge between God's divine grace and follower. Shaking the headship of the Church would endanger the established social structure. The relative Pope must obey the ecclesiastical laws that appeal to Christendom with his authority (LINDSAY, 1906, p. 514). The Pope guards the traditions of Christianity and the truth of the Bible. Attacking the Pope is to side with the heretics. As head of the Church, Pope provides authoritative interpretations of the Christian tradition. Therefore, no interpretation of the Bible can be independent of the traditions of the Church. Private interpretation jeopardizes the unity of the church and threatens orthodoxy. As such, all contemporary moral practices depend on the integrity of the Christian tradition as interpreted by the Pope. Catholic humanists' all plans for curia reform, including *Consilium*, have centred on the Pope's character. The Pope becomes the embodiment of the system, and whatever the facts, the Pope is portrayed as eager for reform.

Most Holy Father, and truly Most Holy, instructed by the Spirit of God, and with more than that former prudence of yours, since you have devoted yourself fully to the task of curing the ills and restoring good health to the Church of Christ committed to your care. (JOHN, 1983, p. 187).

The Catholic humanists emphasized the Pope's irreplaceable role as a "bridge", and Dong Zhongshu made a similar point: the Emperor (天子, Tianzi, the Son of Heaven) had the "nature of a saint", which was the highest good. As the monarch possesses the most virtuous personality, the common people must rely on the monarch's edification to perfect their moral practices. According to Dong, "Heaven" is virtuous, and all things come into being due to the virtues of "Heaven", representing the highest and most universal virtue. Therefore, the "Son of Heaven" inherited the virtues of Heaven, and the monarch was one with Heaven (天人合一, Tian-Ren Heyi, Man, And Nature In One) to justify his rule. Hence, as the embodiment of the sage of virtue, it was the monarch's primary task to educate the people, especially to cultivate virtue. In *Luxuriant Gems of the Spring and Autumn*, Dong

moralizes everything. For example, the relationship between man and Heaven and between man and all things is a moral relationship.

Heaven is the lord of the numerous spirits and is what the king reveres above all other spirits. (66. The Principles of the Suburban Sacrifice). (DONG, 2015, p. 519).

The Son of Heaven alone receives orders from Heaven; the world receives orders from the Son of Heaven; a single state receives orders from its lord. (41. Heaven, the Maker of Humankind). (DONG, 2015, p. 519).

Second, Catholic humanists and Dong Zhongshu believe that the primary cause of corruption and disorder in the state, church, and society is the rulers' lack of competence and virtue, and virtue politics directly relates virtue to the legitimacy of power. Guided by Aristotle's "classical" virtue, the purpose of human life is a certain type of life. And the purpose of this life constitutes the way we live our whole life. Humans' certain misfortunes, such as homely appearance and humble upbringing, prevent them from realizing their virtues. Yet, in Christian theology, virtue is defined as the quality to overcome evil. Catholic humanists combine the two, cultivating people with "virtue" through humanist education. They hope that virtuous men will follow God's revelation and overcome evil in their hearts. Dong draws on the 'Interaction of Heaven and Man' (Tian-ren Gan Ying, 天人感应): since the ruler had a connection with the heavens, calamities and auspiciousness can reflect the ruler's ability to rule the world. Here there is an implied curb on the Emperor's power, the catastrophe is a warning to the ruler, and if the latter ignores this warning, it gives the potential rebels more reason to shake up their reigns.

For that Spirit of God, by whom the power of the heavens has been established, as the prophet says, has determined to rebuild through you the Church of Christ, tottering, nay, in fact, collapsed, and, as we see, to apply your hand to this ruin, and to raise it up to its original height and restore it to its pristine beauty (DONG, 2015, p. 364).

If the lord's orders comply [with Heaven], the people will have cause to comply with his orders; if the lord's orders defy [Heaven], the people will have cause to disobey his orders.<sup>3</sup> Thus it is said: "When the One Man enjoys blessings, the myriad commoners will rely on it." (41. Heaven, the Maker of Humankind) (DONG, 2015, p. 186).

Natural disasters are Heaven's warnings; bizarre events are Heaven's threats. If Heaven warns [the ruler] and he does not acknowledge [these warnings], then Heaven will frighten him with threats. (30. The Necessity of [Being] Humane and Wise) (DONG, 2015, p. 364).

The enlightened and virtuous rulers are the embodiment of the ultimate virtue. They know how to exercise power, respect the common good and the well-being of the community, and care for people both materially and spiritually. Remarkably, as a spiritual leader, the Pope is clearly aware that the education of virtue far outclasses the suppression of violence. Only by superseding force with virtue can believers become more religious and achieve long-term stability in the world of Christ.

Third, virtue politics proposes the renovation of social ethos by setting moral models. The political reform scheme of governing people by virtue, advocated by Catholic humanists, resembles Confucius's idea that "[...] when seeing a man of virtue and talent, one should think of equaling him". Because of his special position in the reform, the Pope is encouraged to become a moral model that the believers are eager to emulate via virtue and wisdom and, in turn, to raise all the clergy's moral level. Catholic humanists believe that the education of church schools and religious institutes can practice the learning of wisdom and the quest for virtue, through which the believer's body or mind can be inclined to the supreme good. On the contrary, if one's behavior falls below the standard of moral expectations, he will be condemned by public opinion and thus bear psychological pressure (DONG, 2015, p. 322). In other words, humanists hold that the power of moral admonitions is more effective than physical pain. For those reformers, the primary clergy's immoral behavior is not solely a result of their shortcomings. It is largely due to the senior clerics' irresponsibility in not providing appropriate schemes of moral discipline and supervision. The Catholic humanists' concern with the hierarchy of the Curia and the clergy's virtue is exceedingly strong in Rome, which is in sheer contrast to that of the average humanists for the worldly problems of the laity. The Catholic humanists' ideal of the Church made them all the more abhorrent to the tolerance of ills and loyal to the institutionalized Church and its teachings.

Concerning moral exemplars, Dong Zhongshu emphasizes that whether ordinary people turn to good or evil ultimately depends on whether a Saint Emperor can teach them. He stresses the "sage's" irreplaceable nature,

the monarch as the only individual who transmits virtue, and the Confucian “saintly emperor’s” disciplinary and hierarchical nature. What distinguishes man from all things is the virtue represented by benevolence (Ren, 仁). Although acquiring virtue is a dynamic process that can be shaped, only the Emperor can teach the common people. The corresponding Emperor (the moral example) must be careful in his words and actions, close to the virtuous and away from the villainous, and inwardly move closer to “benevolence” (the highest good).

Heaven provides the common people with a nature that possesses the basic substance [to become good], but that is not yet capable of being good. Consequently, it establishes a king on their behalf to make it good. Such is Heaven’s intention. The people receive from Heaven a nature that is not yet capable of being good, and they humbly receive from the king the education that will complete their nature. The king supports Heaven’s intention and considers it his responsibility to complete the people’s nature. (35. Deeply Examine Names and Designations) (DONG, 2015, p. 350).

For the most part, unlike Confucianism, which emphasizes the practice of virtue as closely linked to social behavior through the Three Fundamental Bonds and Five Constant Virtues (三纲五常), Catholic humanists prefer to enumerate the specific elements of virtue, including justice, generosity, prudence, temperance, kindness, graciousness, etc., without any intention of exploring either the depth of the philosophical definition of virtue or of describing a blueprint for its concrete practice. Nevertheless, it cannot be disregarded that, although making every effort to declare the political roles of virtues, they rarely suggest commensurate methodologies or workable answers to the problems of political virtue practice. *Consilium*, for example, deals with the cardinals’ specific financial problems and privileged interests, and a part of the clergy consciously resisted this document. Although Catholic humanists were committed to “eradicate all ills,” the text neglected the financial limits of the Church due to the Reformation or the tax exemption policy of the chartered Catholic state. It also recommended selecting more virtuous candidates for the priesthood, which aligned with cultural prerequisites but lacked institutional criteria in reform practice. The idea of selecting more virtuous men for the priesthood, while consistent with the cultural requirements of the time, lacked institutional criteria in the specific reform practices. This is not to say that the Catholic humanists were hypocritical in their view of the politics of virtue,

but they did not consider this document to be a detailed plan of action at the outset of the opinion; rather, it was a call to action. The aim was to articulate a “restoration” of traditional virtues of the Church and to promote the Pope as the centerpiece of Catholic moral reform.

## CONCLUSIONS

Every political form must rely on certain moral ethics to construct its theoretical framework and guide its political practice. Throughout the development of modern Western philosophy, it is evident that the virtue philosophy of Catholic humanism eventually facilitated the reform of the Catholic Church in the 16th century and became a significant component of the Christian ideological tradition. This has further gained the historians, philosophers and political scientists’ considerable attention to the issue of early modern church reform in the past half-century (ELISABETH, 1996, p. 415-417).

The political vision of Catholic humanists’ emphasis on reforming by virtue formed the blueprint for the succeeding reforms at the Council of Trent (1545-1563). Under Paul III, although their virtue practice overestimated the importance of the virtue to politics while underestimating other elements of politics, such as church organization, law, finance, etc., which limited the outcomes of *Consilium* during the time, the virtue philosophy proposed by Catholic humanists holds that human virtue is transcendental, absolute and independent of any individual’s will. From the day of his birth, a man must abide by certain absolute ideologies and moral ethics. This ideology and virtue system is not only the inheritance of a sort of historical tradition but also an embodiment of the church rulers’ ruling will.

In addition, as some Catholic humanists gained church office, their desire to criticize the church and conduct virtue reforms may decline accordingly. Especially as their status and political influence grow, any major reforms may adversely affect their finances and their families’ social status. This ultimately leads to compromise – a combination of personal and church interests – which undermines the papal reforms advocated by Catholic humanists, resulting in mere formality and a loss of coercive force. No matter the outcome of Catholic humanists’ ultimate Reformation, they have attempted to link the church reform with the general reform of Christendom. Virtue reformation is not just pure Roman Reformation. It is universal. The

Reformation in Rome would provide examples and mechanisms for the rest of Christendom. By Paul III's time, the Pope and the Council reached a consensus on their views of reform, laying the political basis for implementing the virtue reformation in *Consilium*.

Whether it refers to the God's Christian "supreme good", the "benevolence" of Chinese Confucianism, or the "kindness" of Buddhism, Catholic humanist scholars' thinking paradigm of combining virtue and practice has profound implications. In the end, it can be seen that Catholic humanism in *Consilium* interprets the God's virtues as the salvation of the church. Therefore, the idea of virtue has a solid metaphysical foundation. In terms of epistemology, although a human's modest self-control ability is far from being impenetrable by infinite "evil," according to virtue philosophy, it seemingly offers us a rational way to know God. In ethics, through the view of the God's unity and the supreme good, virtue ethics guides the church to carry out moral reform for self-salvation, manifesting an optimistic attitude. From Dong Zhongshu and the Catholic humanists' virtuous practices, scholars who followed were encouraged to investigate the relationship between virtue and politics further.

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**Resumen:** Cómo ver la reforma de la iglesia católica en el siglo XVI y su relación con la virtud es un tema importante en el estudio de la filosofía humanista. Los humanistas enfatizan que la educación virtuosa es la base para cultivar la personalidad y creen que restaurar las virtudes de la iglesia es la "cura" para los males de la iglesia moderna temprana. Consilium de emendanda Ecclesia (1537) es la práctica de la virtud de los humanistas católicos. Esto se refleja en propuestas para fortalecer las normas educativas y las disciplinas socio-morales y enfatizar el perfeccionamiento de la virtud clerical como la fuerza impulsora para la reforma. Además, bajo la guía de la ética de la virtud, la política de la virtud se convierte en la ideología guía de la práctica política de esos humanistas, donde reconocen la autoridad del papa y de la iglesia y asocian la virtud con la legitimidad del poder. La filosofía de la virtud en Consilium forma el fundamento ideológico para la reforma de la iglesia católica. El erudito chino antiguo Dong Zhongshu (179-104 B.C.) practicó una política similar de la virtud. En las exuberancia de la primavera y el otoño, combina legitimidad del gobierno con la virtud basada en el derecho divino de los reyes, perpetuó el concepto confuciano del "sabio". Tanto humanistas católicos como Dong enfatizaron la importancia de la virtud de los gobernantes como agentes de Dios.

**Palabras clave:** Virtud. Humanismo católico. Reforma católica. Política de la virtud.

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