

MORALITY AND ETHICS FOR A NEW WORLD

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WHAT IS THE RIGHT thing to do? What are the standards by which moral judgements are to be made? How am I to live as a good person? These are ever-present questions in daily life, the media, business and international relations in our global village. Catholic Christians experience these challenges with all of humanity. Forty years after the Second Vatican Council much has changed. The Council gave an impetus to the renewal of Catholic moral thinking. This paper maps some of the main developments over this period and offers indicators as to the direction Catholic moral theology might take in the future.

In *Optatam totius*, the Decree on Priestly Formation paragraph 16, the Council outlined a renewal agenda for the study of moral theology in seminaries. Its teaching is clear and precise. The text reads

Special attention needs to be given to the development of moral theology. Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching. It should show the nobility of the Christian vocation of the faithful, and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.

This statement provides a useful starting point for exploring the various ways moral thinking and research have developed through the four decades since the close of the Council. It is important to note here that other significant conciliar documents also engaged moral and ethical questions. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, explored a range of issues: marriage and family, socio-economic life, the political community, the fostering of peace and the

promotion of a community of nations. *Dignitatis humanae*, the Declaration on Religious Freedom, opened up issues such as freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.

Scientific Exposition and Scriptural Basis

For almost a hundred years prior to the Second Vatican Council a small group of scholars in Germany attempted to break out of the dominant mode of doing moral theology in Catholic universities and seminaries. Their starting point was the word of God in Scripture. For them all moral analysis must be thoroughly biblical.

This approach reversed a style of moral thinking that was shaped by the preoccupations of the Council of Trent. The Tridentine reform of the Church gave great emphasis to priestly formation, to the development of seminaries, and to programmes that would equip priests to be leaders in the Catholic community as it struggled to oppose the inroads of Protestantism.

Three factors influenced the development of moral science in the centuries following Trent. First, the medieval synthesis of theology best illustrated in the *Summa Theologiae* of St Thomas Aquinas was replaced by discrete disciplines studying human living: moral theology was distinguished from ascetical theology and both were separated from canon law. Second, two Jesuit professors Francesco Suarez and Gabriel Vazquez at the Collegio Romano, later known as the Gregorian University in Rome, published extensively on justice and rights. This gave a strong juridical emphasis to subsequent theoretical expositions of moral

theology. Third, and perhaps most important of all, moral theology was seen primarily as directed to the preparing of priests for their role as confessors in the sacrament of penance.

In addition to the strong legal emphasis just referred to, students of moral science explored cases of conscience as a way of assisting penitents to evaluate their degree of moral certainty or culpability. This case-study approach to the moral life, often referred to as casuistry, had the effect of focusing on the penitent's particular moral situation or dilemma. What ensued was a moral approach that gave priority to the individual and his or her moral stance before God. The manuals or handbooks of moral theology that were used in seminaries around the world for a century before Vatican II were greatly influenced by the above three emphases.

Vatican II undoubtedly authenticated the exploratory efforts by nineteenth century German scholars towards a biblically based moral theology. Since 1965 the teaching of scripture is to be seen as the starting point and guiding influence in all Catholic moral theological study. *Dei Verbum*, the Council's document on divine revelation, reminds us that God's word is always pondered and acted upon within the context of the faith community of the church. Scripture, therefore, is a precious resource for moral living and moral analysis. Its contribution is not only to be found in biblical study but is also influential in Christian worship and through the practice of the moral life in the world. The task of interpreting and applying biblical insights to contemporary issues is not an easy one. In many churches today that rely solely on scripture as the source of moral guidance, the current divisions and conflicts on issues relating to homosexuality illustrate how complex is this hermeneutical task.

The deductive 'principlist' approach of post-Tridentine moral texts has now given way to a more inductive approach that is attentive to the contributions of the human sciences. This brings a great number of challenges in its wake. Take for instance the enormous strides made in the biomedical sciences. Rapid scientific developments in areas such as embryology, ge-

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netics, and new drug therapies parallel a wide range of new approaches to be found in the behavioural sciences. As a result contemporary psychology and personalism have now placed Church teaching on human sexuality and marriage under stress. Evaluating the assumptions present in these new insights, engaging the lived reality of people as they struggle with issues of their sexual and marital lives and, at the same time, entering into dialogue with our Catholic values and tradition is a contested, even messy place to be.

Moralists also experience tensions within the Church as they explore a range of issues associated with magisterial teaching, norms and conscience. John Paul II's encyclical *Veritatis splendor* critiqued and condemned consequentialist and proportionalist approaches to moral norms and the moral act. The objective nature of morality and moral norms were strongly affirmed as was the competence of the magisterium to speak on moral issues. These and a range of other disputed areas indicate how difficult is the task to advance our understanding of the moral life in a manner that enriches, supports and enlightens our living of the Gospel call to holiness in the world.

The Baptised and Their Vocation to be Holy

A preoccupation with personal sin characterised the moral lives of Catholic Christians to well after Vatican II. Catholics whose religious education occurred prior to the Council are familiar with the practice of regular, even weekly, confession. The periodic parish mis-

sion provided an intense focus on the basics of Catholic living with a particular emphasis on the mission confession. These practices have their roots in the renewal agenda mapped by the Council of Trent.

The legalistic focus on moral certainty and conscience manifested in a preoccupation with sin and the confession of sins may be traced back to the writings of Augustine of Hippo in the fifth century. His anti-Pelagian rhetoric about the will and human freedom together with his suspicion of the chaotic forces arising from our human bodily existence made him intensely aware of just how fragile is the will's control over our human emotions and desires. His preoccupation with the human will and the way grace relates to our human willing has had an enduring influence on Christian ethical thinking down the centuries. The later insights of Bonaventure and the Franciscan tradition on the human will and the life of charity enriched the medieval appreciation the role of the will in the moral life. The later theories of William of Ockham and the influence of nominalist thinking are evident in the thinking of the reformers as they addressed issues of grace, salvation and the role of the human response to the process of justification by faith. Once the individual assumed centre stage in Protestant thinking the way he or she lived their Christian commitment in the world became increasingly significant. Contemporary secular and pluralist society is heir to this preoccupation.

In referring to the historical evolution of the role of the will in western thinking and the pre-eminence of the moral subject most Catholic Christians today share with their fellow citizens basic assumptions about the rights associated with autonomy and its exercise in freedom. In doing so a preoccupation about choice in human living all too often narrows the moral agenda to the particularities of the dilemma confronting the moral person. The Pauline understanding of 'freedom for' provides a counter to much of the contemporary focus on choice. Understandings of conversion, holiness, the influence of the Holy Spirit expressed in a life lived virtuously offer a much

fuller picture. A theologically rich understanding of the human person seeks to give weight to all these elements.

Catholics often point to a loss of a sense of sin in the church and the world. Where personal sin has been understood up until now as the wrong use of one's freedom *vis-à-vis* the commandments of God or the teachings of the church, this has given way to a broader understanding of social or structural sin. Contemporary sensitivity to the social dimensions of human sinfulness is well illustrated by our concern for the ecological evils of environmental degradation and the structures of injustice that result in oppression, war and exploitation of humans, all living things, and the environment. This shift in perspective has been beneficial for it replaces our previous narrow, legalistic concern with particular sinful faults. These must now be understood and integrated into a more profound appreciation of the reality of human evil and sin. This change of emphasis does not diminish the central role that human responsibility has in the reality of sin. Rather it suggests that current Catholic moral thinking has been enriched and deepened in a way not possible for a discipline that had previously been dominated by the literature and practice of sin and penance.

In emphasising the exalted nature of the Christian vocation of the baptised the Council fathers instigated a revolution in the way we should approach the moral life and ethical thinking. Perhaps it may be more aptly characterised as 'back to the future'. In returning to the biblical and patristic sources the moral life is seen in developmental terms, as a journey in faith, justice and love. This is clearly a radical change from the ordered and somewhat static perspectives of much natural law thinking. Furthermore, it differs significantly from the cultural morality of the institutional church that has dominated the upbringing of some of us older Catholics.

Catholics are now to see themselves as called by the Lord, gifted with faith through baptism and enabled by the Holy Spirit to live responsibly in the world. For some this is a

frightening possibility. The securities of the ordered, clearly defined moral doctrines and practices of the post-Tridentine church have given way to an appreciation of the role and obligations of individual conscience. Each believer is responsible before God for his or her behaviour in a way that is shaped by the beatitudes more than by the commandments. This is sometimes a struggle for the faithful believer. He or she is to integrate the teachings of the church into what is right and good in the concrete situations of daily living. At times in this process some come to dissent from aspects of church teaching. All of this must be seen in the context of people seeking to grow in holiness amid the complexities of family, social and political life.

Roman Catholic ethics must now and in the future examine more effectively the implications of the Council's call to holiness and the understanding of the nobility of the Christian vocation for the life of the world. The moral life for the baptised is immersed in the mystery of our relationship with the risen Lord through his Spirit. This emphasis has renewed a central understanding of Christian moral living. Our lives have an eternal purpose, context and texture. Aquinas in the thirteenth century articulated our eternal destiny in the language of *beatitudo* or happiness. Christian theology understands the moral life in terms of its ultimate purpose or finality. The end of our earthly existence is our union with God where we shall see God face to face. This teleological or purpose-filled understanding of morality and ethics is more than ever important today in our secular world. Many contemporary non-believers or those who live immersed in a culture that blunts even the desire to ask questions beyond their immediate reality understand moral issues in terms of intermediate ends. These two fundamentally different stances towards morality and ethics must be grasped if we are to engage in and contribute to the ethical conversations central to the quality of our social living and the future of society.

The two issues of suicide and euthanasia well illustrate these radically opposed perspec-

tives. For the secular world pain and suffering, questions of quality of life, and the right to exercise choice drive claims that individuals have the right to exit from life when the individual judges this to be a necessary or good thing to do. The Christian response looks to the ultimate purpose of our human existence. Human life is a gift over which we exercise stewardship as we seek to be faithful to Christ who transformed life through his dying and rising. This relational, personal and faith-filled perspective speaks a different language that will be little comprehended by our non-believing, upright, secular citizen. If we are to enter the market place of ideas as Catholics who have a 'thick' understanding of life and death and engage with others proposing 'thin' conceptions of life and death, then much more effort must go into expressing our natural law way of thinking and argumentation. If this does not occur the repetition of biblical, theological or ethical mantras in place of detailed argumentation will but simply hasten the already considerable irrelevance of church thinking and church-speak on issues of morality and ethics.

The Fruit of Charity

The moral task of the believer as outlined in the teaching of *Optatam totius* is now to be understood as a life that brings forth fruit in charity for the life of the world. What does it mean to claim that good and right moral living is immersed in the reality of God's love or charity?

The imperative to offer care to one's neighbour after the example of the Good Samaritan with the love of Christ has tended throughout Christian history to set an extremely high ideal for the followers of Jesus. His teaching is central to the Christian life: 'I am giving you a new commandment: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you too must love one another.' (Jn. 13:34) How is this call to be meshed with the human experience of finiteness, personal limitation and sinfulness? In answering this question it is important to note the ambiguity of the phrase 'as I have loved

you'. Christian teaching has always insisted that one must love 'as Jesus loved'. This, however, may indicate a number of things: (1) that *agape* is a formal principle of the Christian life; (2) that it refers to Jesus' understanding of what constitutes the welfare of others; (3) that the extent of his love is what is being demanded, namely one should be prepared to sacrifice one's life for the other; (4) that it concerns only the religious context of his love (MacNamara 1985, 149).

Raymond Brown, the eminent American Johannine scholar, has argued that 'as I have loved you' emphasises that Jesus is the source of the Christian's love for one another. In this sense it is effective: 'it brings about their salvation' (Brown 1971, 612-614). Only in a secondary sense does it refer to Jesus as the standard of Christian love. If this is the case it is still not clear how we can love one another *as* Jesus did in the first sense, so as 'to bring about their salvation', unless it is that our loving faith is a channel for *his* love (saving grace) to others.

There is, however, a subsidiary sense where Jesus' love is understood in terms of absolute righteousness or purity of heart. It was a love shaped by the absoluteness and ultimacy of the God-relationship he had with the Father. The human goods that define human flourishing (life and health, mating and raising children, knowledge, friendship, enjoyment of the arts and play), while desirable and attractive in themselves, are subordinate to this structural God-relationship. A characteristic of the redeemed but still messy human condition is to make idols, to pursue these basic goods *as ends in themselves*. This is the radical theological meaning of secularisation. There occurs a loss of the context that effectively subordinates and relativises basic human goods in a way which prevents human beings from divinising them. 'The goods are so attractive that our constant temptation (or our continuing enslavement, our bondage to the world, our constant need for liberation and deepening conversion) is to center our being on them as ultimate ends, to cling to them with our whole being' (McCor-

mick 1984, 37)

Jesus' love for humankind is primarily an empowering love. It is also, in its purity and righteousness, the standard against this type of idolatry. Whatever he willed for us and did for us, he did within the primacy and ultimacy of the relationship he had with God his Father. Since this relationship is at the centre of our human being and destiny, his love took the form of a constant reminder of this momentous dignity. Jesus' love, as standard, suggests the shape of our Christian love for each other. His conduct reminds others of their true dignity, being and destiny, and therefore supports and protects the status of basic human goods as subordinate. In this sense it is possible to say that Jesus is the norm above all of human self-perception, of what human beings are called to in a new way. Accordingly, following or imitating Christ means, in a negative sense, never pursuing human goods as *final ends* and, positively, entails pursuing them *as subordinate ends*.

An excellent example of charity bearing fruit in the life of the church is to be found in the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*). Tolerance is a core value for life in a pluralist secular society. For a Catholicism with its memory of long struggles between the powers of church and state in Western Europe tolerance, especially religious toleration, was considered anathema. In the post-reformation era Catholic teaching claimed that 'error has no right'. Vatican I (1870) modified this somewhat. It is with *Dignitatis humanae* that Catholic thinking began to appreciate more profoundly three sets of distinctions—between the sacred and secular orders of human existence, between society and the state, between the common good and public order. These clarifications permitted a deeper appreciation of the freedom of conscience in matters religious that is rightly located in the sphere of human competence. It also recognised that in pluralist democratic societies the church's 'participation in public affairs must proceed according to a mode of dialogue and persuasion' (Hollenbach 1988, 13).

For the Life of the World

The wide-ranging changes ushered into the Catholic Church by the Second Vatican Council have resulted, at least in many English speaking nations, in the expenditure of an immense amount of energy in what I would characterise as intra-mural concerns. Preoccupations with liturgy, church life and structure are perhaps necessary for change to occur. They have resulted, however, in less vigorous engagement by Catholics in the economic, political and social agenda of these countries. One has only to look back at the way Catholics involved themselves in the workplace, politics and the development of social policy during the first half of the twentieth century. In our own country the Cardijn movement and its use of the see, judge and act method had a considerable impact.

The contribution of *Gaudium et spes* in opening the church to engagement in the world must be viewed against a century of Catholic social justice teaching. Commencing with Leo XIII's encyclical, *Rerum novarum* in 1891 and concluding with John Paul II's encyclical, *Centesimus annus* in 1991 Catholic social justice teaching provides an invaluable resource for our understanding of the moral life and ethical issues. This body of teaching permits us to appreciate the evolving and, at times, provisional nature of what the church teaches on social issues. This is an important counter-weight to the much less flexible set of teachings on personal moral living in areas such as human life, sexuality and marriage.

Three aspects of this rich resource of social justice teaching might be noted in passing. First, there can be clearly seen a maturing in the church's understanding. The Council's opening to the world is permeated by the optimistic expectations of the 1960s. The conciliar documents emphasised that creation is good, albeit flawed by sin. It has alerted us to the moral imperative to engage in the building up of creation and in working for the common good of all. These central insights are vital for an engaged social ethic. A maturing of

understanding is also to be seen in the issues canvassed in the magisterial statements. Starting with a Eurocentric preoccupation with the rights of the worker in manufacturing industries Catholic social teaching has expanded its view to explore the causes and scope of poverty in global terms.

It is beyond the scope of this paper to go into any greater detail about what I believe is a significant and little understood tradition of social justice teaching. I agree with Peter Henriot that over a century of Catholic social justice teaching is the Church's best kept secret.

An increasingly important challenge for Catholic social thought is the issue of Catholic identity in secular, pluralist society. Catholic social teaching on the human person, the place of the family, and the nature of society clearly diverge from dominant views of the liberal society present in democratic societies such as our own. Earlier reference was made to the difference between a morality and ethics of ultimate versus intermediate ends. A similar polarisation is to be found when the communitarian framework and values of Catholic teaching and life come into conflict with the central values of the individual, autonomy, and tolerance essential to life in the liberal democratic society.

Catholic values and employment practices are but one instance of this conflict. Catholic schools stand for the standards and values of the church. This at times conflicts with the lifestyles of some teachers who frequently claim the rights and values of the liberal society in their defence. More complex are the issues associated with institutional collaboration. Catholic hospitals are increasingly pressured by the claims of individuals for certain procedures such as an abortion or other life-threatening interventions. Use of common facilities raises a range of questions about moral complicity in behaviour that is judged to be morally wrong from a Catholic point of view. In an earlier era when schools, hospitals and other organisations were not supported by public funds questions of moral cooperation or complicity in behaviour judged

to be contrary to Catholic moral and ethical teaching were rarely, if ever, considered. I believe these issues are and will continue to be of great importance and urgency as Catholic Christians seek to live their vocation in what the American Jesuit moralist, James Bretzke, calls a 'morally complex world'.

of the world, in other words, that it bear fruit in effective charity.

Conclusion

In using the renewal agenda for Catholic moral theology given to us in Vatican II's document on Priestly Formation this paper has indicated some of the ways the Church has opened a door to new theological approaches to the moral life and to the process of ethical thinking. This paper has specified changes in the areas of (a) methodology, i.e. the necessity of a scientific exposition of morality and ethics; (b) the central place that Scripture has in the task of doing moral theology; (c) the focus on the call to be holy in the Christian life; (d) the centrality of charity and (e) the need for the Christian life to make a substantive contribution to the life

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Men and women have the specific duty to move always towards the truth, to respect it and bear responsible witness to it. Living in the truth has special significance in social relationships. In fact, when the coexistence of human beings within a community is founded on the truth, it is ordered and fruitful, and it corresponds to their dignity as persons. The more people and social groups strive to resolve social problems according to the truth, the more they distance themselves from abuses and act in accordance with the objective demands of morality.

(Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church,