

CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Moral Dilemmas or Something More?

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CONSIDER THIS experience. I normally begin a course in Christian Ethics by asking the students to say the first image or word that comes to mind when they hear the words ‘morality’ or ‘ethics’. It is intriguing to find, even in 2011, how often the response is ‘rules’ or ‘solving moral dilemmas.’ Perhaps the first phrase indicates a view of the moral life that is deeply-embedded for cultural or religious reasons. The second response is more understandable, given the nature of public life. Church leaders are called to respond to legal and moral questions concerning, for example, IVF, same-sex marriage, genetic engineering, economic justice, asylum seekers, *etc.*

When morality is seen as a particular approach to solving moral problems or as a set of rules, we are reminded that any perspective is limited. Making judgments about difficult ethical matters is important and rules express the demands of reality. But our capacity to make wise judgments and to appreciate the values beneath rules rests on a more basic role of Christian Ethics, namely, to clarify what it means to lead a good life, what that requires and to help people to do so. There have been many advances in this area in the past two decades. This article aims to highlight the more significant developments, with specific reference to the Catholic tradition.¹

Where do We Begin—a Love Story²

The students’ responses noted above could be seen as the residue of the common approach to Christian Ethics in the Catholic tradition until Vatican II and the 1960s. Within the discipline of Christian Ethics itself, its specialist practitioners moved beyond the ‘legal’ approach to

the Christian moral life to one centred on the call-response of discipleship, namely following the way of Jesus. This sort of process does not happen overnight—for ordinary people as much as for specialist theologians. For instance, the North American Jesuit moral theologian, James Keenan writes in 2004:

I teach an introductory course on moral theology, and during my fifteen years teaching it I only recently learned to begin my course on the topic of love. Not only did I not begin my course on love, I never even taught a class on it.

He goes on to say ‘I always started with freedom’, namely the basic freedom in grace ‘to realize the call of God.’³

Here we have, nearly forty years after Vatican II, a leading Christian Ethicist suddenly realizing that when we ask ‘Where do I begin?’ of Christian Ethics, the answer is that it is a Love Story. It does not start with *us* in, for instance, the experience of conscience or of our freedom. It starts with *God*—the God who only wants to love, to share the divine life with us and all creation.

But there is more. To be able to respond to the gift of God’s love, we need the wherewithal that comes from God. God alone can give us the ‘yes’ to say ‘yes’ to his call to love. In other words, the gift of *faith* enables us to respond in love to God’s invitation to love and share a life. This gift—that we name as ‘grace’—involves faith that seeks greater understanding. It shapes us at the level of head, heart and hands. Our identity, perceptions and dispositions are slowly transformed. To appreciate the significance of this change of focus about the moral life, it may help to stand back and look at the context behind the shift.

Where have we come from? Generally, it is fair to say that the general attitude driving

the more legal approach to the moral life over hundreds of years was summed up in one sentence: ‘If I don’t sin, God will love me.’ Beneath this lies, what Patrick O’Sullivan refers to, as an ‘operational’ image of God.⁴ It is the one that, at the heart-level, guides a person’s expectations of God. Here, God is a judge and demands that I will gain God’s love if I measure up to what God requires. God’s love is something I earn. If I don’t sin, then God will love me. If I do sin, God’s won’t love me.

Another way of expressing this view of the Christian moral life is in the phrase ‘You can’t be too careful.’ This approach has four outcomes. The spotlight is on ‘don’t get sick.’ The moral life is basically about pathology rather than healthy living. Secondly, it is driven by fear, namely of avoiding potholes on the road of life, even if it is the way of Jesus. Thirdly, actions come before character and attitudes. *What I do* is more important than *who I am*. Finally, this approach is individualistic. It tends to put the emphasis on *me* and only secondarily on God, even less on relationships with others and in society.

What has emerged in the past fifty years? We start with ‘God *loves us*—no conditions.’ The underlying operational image of God is that of a God of unconditional love. It is embodied in the parable of the loving father and the two sons. It is a move from saying ‘God loves me because I am good’ to ‘I am good because God loves me.’ All God asks is that we let ourselves be loved—to receive that gift. In receiving that gift, I am enabled to say ‘Yes.’ Perhaps being saved is less from sin than from our fear of being loved?

If God loves me no matter what, then four things follow. It starts with God *loves us*. I am called to share in the divine life and, through that, to work together with God. Secondly, this shapes my identity, my attitudes and is reflected in my actions. Most importantly, it is not about avoiding sin but growing in loving responsiveness and *responsibility* in my various relationships – with God, others, the world, creation and oneself. Finally, the emphasis has shifted from ‘me’ to ‘us.’



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Understood thus, the Christian moral life has a spiritual foundation. Spirituality and morality need each other. Spirituality grounds and animates the moral life. Morality ensures that spirituality has ‘skin on’ – that it is embodied in our everyday relationships.⁵ It is important to recall that the emphasis here is on God’s action. Right from the start, with the Gifts of Spirit given at Baptism, God’s transforming action is at work. It is more God’s work than ours.

When I sin—fail in my relationships, when I am not my best self—God still loves me. Does guilt have a role? Of course it does. It tells me that something is amiss within my various relationships with repercussions in my relationship with God. So what about being saved? It is certainly from fear of being loved. But I need to be saved in my *person* with all its aspects. We are not exempt from Jesus’ comment that the just person falls ‘seven times a day.’ Being ‘saved’ manifests our need for God to heal us from destructive or divisive tendencies that are often beyond our conscious awareness. Most importantly, we are saved *from* something because we are saved *for* something—a shared life with God.

Edward Vacek SJ captures the Christian spiritual/moral life with four phrases.

God loves us
We love God
We and God form a Community
*We and God cooperate*⁶

Our discussion, captured in Vacek’s compact summary, distills a range of ingredients. What are some of its more significant elements? This can be approached in two stages:

the first will focus on the discipline of Christian Ethics as it addresses the shape and content of Christian discipleship; the second stage will highlight some developments within Christian Ethics precisely as specific field of theological enquiry.

Christian Ethics as a Way of Living

Vatican II called on Christian Ethics ('Moral Theology') to ground itself in the Scriptures with its focus on Jesus Christ. Hence, the 'call-response in love' model of the moral life. Subsequent to the Council, advances in Scripture studies uncovered some of the difficulties for Christian Ethics concerning Scripture as a source of moral insight and of moral norms.

While this shift in focus is central, the emphasis of the human person is, arguably, the most important element in the renewed understanding of Christian Ethics since that time. A commonly cited reflection of this shift in Theological Anthropology is from the official 1965 commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* No. 51 concerning the criterion of morality.

Human activity must be judged in so far as it refers to the human person integrally and adequately considered.⁷

This marks a transition from seeing human existence in terms of nature (what we have in common with each other and especially as corporeal beings) to what is unique about the human rational animal, namely personhood. It is characterized by embodiment, certainly. It is through our bodies that the unique quality of each person is expressed, namely the capacity for rationality, relationship and creativity combined with the call to grow in the divine image through collaboration with divine providence. Many of the recent advances in Christian Ethics in the Catholic tradition in the past fifty years have been built on this foundation.

Further, discussion amongst Catholic Theological Ethicists for two or more decades after Vatican II was predominantly in terms of autonomy and personal conscience, whether in itself or in relation to the Church. From the

mid-nineties there has been a marked swing to a more relational and communitarian view of the person. 'Relationship' is not an added extra, argues Joseph Ratzinger in 1990 (a view continued in his encyclicals as Benedict XVI).⁸ Starting from the Trinitarian Word as a person constituted from and in relationship, to be-in-relation is constitutive of the human person. Seen in that light, rationality is less dominant in this view of personhood. It is important, clearly, but is understood more as rationality 'for the sake of', 'at the service of' relationship.

Allied to this are recent advances concerning Trinitarian theology together with their impact both on Christian Ethics and on understanding the moral life. There is a deepened appreciation that God's self-gift in grace entails a share in the life and relationships of the persons of the Trinity. As 'partakers of the divine nature' (2 Peter 1:4), we are called to be increasingly transformed in our rational operations at the cognitive, affective and volitional levels. We are enabled by divine action to know, judge, love and will in harmony with the persons of the Trinity.

Further, this dynamic activity is at the service of the relationships that constitute the 'event' of the Trinity's life—the incessant giving and receiving of love, the affirming of the truth and goodness of each person (Father, Word, Spirit) that generates infinite joy and overwhelming happiness.⁹ It spills over into the service of the various relational dimensions of human existence— with others, society, nature and oneself.

In so far as 'we and God form a community', we are slowly transformed in the process. As part of the community of faith in the Church, we have the guidance of its leaders, its teaching and, in particular, the presence and action of the Holy Spirit. Together with the Liturgy and the Scriptures, who we are (our identity), how we see and interpret the world (perceptions) and our attitudes (dispositions to respond to what is truly good) are slowly shaped such that we 'put on the mind of Christ.'

This approach suggested by the late William Spohn parallels the language of the virtues (developed, for instance, by James Keenan).¹⁰ For Keenan, the virtues are not so much good habits that perfect the self. They are more those readily responsive dispositions to be increasingly sensitive to what fosters growth in the various relationships that make up our lives.

Further, there is an enhanced appreciation of the role of emotions and human affectivity in moral living. Our emotions are meant to be our friends not our enemies. Without them, as Charles Taylor points out, ‘we become incapable of understanding any moral argument at all’.¹¹ They are part of what it means to be rational. Without them, we cannot grow in virtues. Emotions are part of the virtues and are meant to exist within the purposes of rationality, namely, to be at the service of relationships. Being affected and being responsive manifest the realization of the divine image in the world.

The gradual transformation of identity, perceptions and dispositions provides the bridge between Vacek’s sharing in the divine ‘community’ and how ‘we and God cooperate.’ The focal point of all this is that of ‘transformed judgment’—to evaluate, judge and choose with the mind and heart of God through identification with Jesus and guided by his Spirit.¹¹ This converges with John Paul II’s comment that the Church

...puts herself always and only at the *service of conscience* ...helping it not to swerve from the truth about the good of man [*sic*]...to attain the truth with certainty and to abide in it.¹²

Christian Ethics: As a Field of Theological Enquiry

From our discussion, clearly Christian Ethics as an academic practice is more interdisciplinary. We have noted closer links with Spirituality and Systematic Theology. There is a pressing need to explore other areas concerning personhood that have implications for Theological Anthropology as the underpinning of Christian Ethics. Integral to this is the role of the human sciences—Psychology, Anthro-

pology and Sociology. With questions emerging in Bioethics and Genetics, there is a consequent need for Christian Ethicists to be *au courant* with the latest advances in the areas of scientific research that bear on moral issues arising in these fields.

The practitioners of Christian Ethics are today characteristically lay people and, increasingly, women theologians.¹³ Moral issues are seen less from a clerical perspective and more from that of secular and married life. Again, Christian Ethics is becoming increasingly international in character, inclusive in scope and culturally pluralistic. For instance, the North American journal *Theological Studies* is, in many ways, a mirror of the changing face of Christian Ethics mainly, but not exclusively, in the English speaking Catholic world. Between 1998 and 2011 in its annual ‘Notes on Moral Theology’, it devoted separate treatments to Moral Theology in Western Europe, East Asia, Africa, Latin America, Beyond Western Bioethics and the Search for a Global Ethic.

Overall, Christian Ethics, as a discipline, tends to be more at the service of the world than a purely ‘in house’ concern with its own language and debates. Nevertheless, the past two decades have seen Catholic Ethicists engaged in historical studies leading to greater self-understanding and self-evaluation of the tradition of Moral Theology.¹⁴ For instance, in an article along these lines, Keenan and Black offer an insightful discussion on the Manualist tradition.¹⁵ It can be facile to dismiss this tradition as legalistic and sin-oriented. One of the advantages of the Manualist heritage was its respect for the place of differing theological opinions on a particular issue. There could be arguments for a particular theological position that made it a ‘probable’ opinion and hence could be followed as a guide to a judgment of conscience.

Until the mid-twentieth century, as Keenan and Black note, when moral questions were sent to Rome, curial offices or episcopal conferences, the general response was to direct the petitioners to the judgments of ‘approved’ Manualists. This recognized the role of prob-

able opinions in the Catholic theological tradition, the role of the local church and the standing of theologians in relation to the teaching tradition of the Church. These days, there is a more centralized approach—from a range of reasons and influences, one of which is speed of communication. Decisions are more often than not given from Rome. The question is—have we lost something from the Manualist tradition in the process?

Conclusion

Perhaps from these considerations, one has a fuller sense of Christian Ethics—both as a way of Christian living and how its practitioners in the theological academy see themselves and the discipline itself. Christian Ethics is princi-

pally about how to be a follower of Jesus and to collaborate in the work of Divine Providence in the bringing about of the Reign of God in the world. For its specialist practitioners, there is the responsibility to ask hard questions and grapple with them when they are asked by others or by life itself. As a discipline, Christian Ethics—far from being theology's basket for the 'too hard' questions—is increasingly a fascinating and rewarding field.

During the first decade of the third millennium, Christian Ethics, as a field of theological enquiry, has become more global. This goes beyond its interdisciplinary, inclusive and ecumenical qualities. It offers a different context for Christian Ethicists. It also shapes the nature and form of the issues that need to be addressed. This is a topic in itself for a future time.

NOTES

1 These days, the term 'Christian Ethics' is used interchangeably with 'Theological Ethics' and 'Moral Theology' (more common in the Roman Catholic tradition).

2 This expands an earlier discussion in the first article of the *Christian Living Series* in the *Marist Messenger*; July 2005.

3 James F Keenan, SJ, *Moral Wisdom; Lessons and Texts from the Catholic Tradition*. (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers Inc., 2004), 14.

4 Patrick O'Sullivan sj, 'Sure Beats Selling Cardigans': *Fostering Our Relationship with God* (Richmond, Victoria: Aurora Books, 1995), 5-7.

5 Richard Gula, 'Morality and Spirituality' in James Keating [ed.], *Moral Theology: New Directions and Fundamental Issues* (NY/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 2004), 162-177.

6 Edward Collins Vacek, SJ *Love: Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994), xv. 7 p.37-8.

8 See Joseph Ratzinger, 'Retrieving the Tradition: Concerning the notion of person in theology,' *Communio* 17 (Fall, 1990), 440-454 and his later call for a 'deeper critical evaluation of the category of relation' *Caritas in Veritate*, (Strathfield, NSW: St. Pauls, 2009), par. 53.

9 See Anne Hunt, 'Trinity, Grace and the Moral Life' in her *Trinity: Nexus of Mysteries of the Christian Faith* (NY: Maryknoll Orbis, 2005), 165-182.

10 William C Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise; Jesus and Ethics*. (New York, NY: The Continuum International Publishing Group Inc., 1999), (reprinted in 2007).

Harrington Daniel and James F. Keenan. *Jesus and Virtue Ethics; Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005).

11 Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, Cambridge University Press, 1996), 73.

12 See L. Gregory Jones, *Transformed Judgment: Towards a Trinitarian Account of the Moral Life* (Eugene, OR, 2008), 1-19.

13 *Veritatis Splendor* (Homebush, NSW: St. Pauls) 64.

13 For example, the North American theological ethicists Jean Porter, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Margaret Farley and Cathleen Caveney and an increasing number of women from Europe, Latin American, Africa and Asia.

15 See James F Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010); Charles Curran, *The Origins of Moral Theology in the United States* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1997); John Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: A History of Catholic Moral Theology* (New York: Paulist, 1990).

16 Peter Black & James Keenan, 'The Evolving Self-Understanding of the Moral Theologian: 1900-2000', *Studia Moralia* 39 (2001), 291-327, at 303-7.