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BOOK REVIEWS

An Introduction to Moral Theology

by William E. May

Southwestburg, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor, 1991. 239 pages, paperback.

There is no better preparation for Pope John Paul II's announced encyclical on moral matters than reading this excellent textbook. Author William E. May, until recently professor at the Catholic University of America, currently lectures at the Pope John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family. He is a member of the *Linacre Quarterly* editorial advisory board and a frequent contributor to this journal. He lists the Presidency of the Fellowship of Catholic Scholars and membership in the International Theological Commission among his credentials.

An Introduction to Moral Theology is clear, concise and Catholic. It responds to the mandate of Vatican II to produce a scripturally rich and dogmatically solid Moral Theology. May makes available to a wide audience a state of the art explanation of the reasonableness of Roman Catholic moral positions. He presents a strong and coherent position which summarizes, explains and defends clear Catholic teaching. He criticizes effectively the contrary positions whose proportionalist and revisionist methodology is found even in widely used seminary texts. May provides an alternative, a reliable introductory textbook for seminary, college and professional use.

As Professor May acknowledges, much of *An Introduction* depends on the natural law theory in Germain Grisez's monumental *Christian Moral Principles Volume 1: The Way of the Lord Jesus* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1983). Yet this is no mere repetition or popularization. May provides a synthesis of the natural law theory of Aquinas to give the reader a reference point. His extensive citations of contemporary allies and adversaries alerts the reader to the contemporary debate. His updated treatment of the respect owed the moral magisterium incorporates the 1990 statement of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

May presents seven chapters. He grounds the need for a moral theory by examining human dignity, free human action and conscience. We are creatures endowed with an intrinsic, inalienable dignity and charged with shaping our character, our identity as moral beings, by free choices. Using intelligence informed by faith we discover the truth about who we are and what we are to do if we are to be fully the beings we are meant to be in God's plan or law. Conscience is our awareness of moral truth.

Our participation in God's divine and eternal law is precisely what the Catholic theological tradition understands by natural law. We discover this law within our conscience. To form our conscience we must grasp the implications of the basic principles of morality, be alert to the morally significant features of the situation and learn how to apply norms so as to form reasonable judgments. Chapter two explores the classic natural law theory of Thomas Aquinas and the teaching of Vatican II as these are combined in the contemporary approach of Germain Grisez, Joseph Boyle and John Finnis. Bibliographical notes in this section are invaluable to every serious student of this natural law theory.

According to this approach, correct moral judgment is made and a set of true moral standards arrived at by assessing the compatibility of (a) the willing involved in choosing particular intelligible goods for particular persons or groups of persons with (b) the sort of will one should have toward integral human fulfillment. This right sort of will is described as a "heart open to

everything that is really good and to the persons in whom whatever is really good is meant to flourish."

At the risk of oversimplification, I believe May is suggesting that one can have an "attitudinal problem" in which the willing of particular goods for particular individuals or groups is not compatible with a will open to the full human flourishing of all persons. Whenever one's free choices instantiate this sort of willing, the willing excluded by the one or several modes of responsibility, one's choice is immoral. In sum, immorality consists in "bad attitude" willing.

More technically, natural law includes two sets of true propositions. The first set embraces the principles of practical reasoning. Starting from the insight that the good is to be done and evil is to be avoided, these principles identify basic intelligible aspects of human flourishing as goods to be done and pursued. The second set of propositions embraces the principles of moral reasoning. Its starting point is that one ought choose and otherwise will those and only those possibilities whose willing is compatible with a will open to integral human fulfillment. Making this compatibility assessment is facilitated by a listing of the "modes of responsibility." These identify and "exclude ways of choosing whereby one would intentionally ignore, slight, neglect, damage, destroy or impede real human goods or act in ways based purely on nonrational feelings or in ways that unfairly and arbitrarily limit participation by human persons in these goods" (69).

Chapter three goes on to discuss a third set of natural law propositions. This set is made up of more specific moral norms that identify particular kinds of human action that either ought to be done or not done. May argues convincingly that some moral norms are exceptionless, that they have been taught so by the Magisterium and that theologians who reject such norms (revisionists) are in error.

May uses the contraception controversy to identify and defeat the two principle philosophical arguments against moral absolutes. He labels these the totality argument and the theory of proportionate reason or the "preference principle." He defeats both with sophisticated and yet accessible arguments drawing on his 1989 Pere Marquette lecture. In essence May champions the full moral weight of every act of free self determination. His approach is not merely to argue against untenable theories but to show the enduring attractiveness of moral absolutes in the Catholic tradition.

With chapter four the philosophical emphasis shifts to a theological one. May moves from his exposition of the natural law to examine sin and the Christian moral life. Master of a vast bibliography, May draws together Scripture, St. Augustine and St. Thomas, Trent, Vatican II and Pope John Paul II. The result is an encyclopedic treatment of the core meaning of personal sin and the distinction between mortal and venial sin. Again championing the moral significance of each and every free choice, May helps readers realize why some fundamental option theories are incompatible with Catholic faith.

The practical and distinctive demands of *Christian* moral life stem from our faith commitment and vocation to follow Christ. Faith demands that we discern and accept a personal role within the covenant community. The perfect pattern for living the practical demands of faith and vocation is the Sermon on the Mount.

With a clever parallelism, insights from the *Beautitudes* transform the natural law philosophy of part one into a Christian moral theology. May's ethical theory described correct moral choice as willing in keeping with the right *attitude of openness* to the ideal of integral human fulfillment. His theology describes correct Christian choices as willing in keeping with the Gospel *Beatitude of contribution* to the actual and ongoing fulfillment of all things in Christ.

Lastly, in chapter seven, the teaching authority of the Church in matters of morals is detailed and defended. After a clear presentation of why and how the Church teaches moral truth, May argues that the Ten Commandments as they have been traditionally understood within the Church have been infallibly taught by the ordinary and universal Magisterium (214). Drawing on the 1990 *Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian*, May argues convincingly that neither the Council nor post conciliar teaching authorizes dissent from authoritative Church teaching in matters of morals.

This is an excellent first year text for a seminary or college theology. It will be excellent for professional updating. The text is no mere introduction. Those already familiar with the natural law theory it proposes will follow its developments in response to criticism. For students who have been

imbued with revisionist moral thought, May provides a readable corrective. For those with a background in Aquinas, May provides an easy connection to more modern formulation. Especially for the uninitiated this is an excellent place to start.

My criticisms are few and amount to a desire for more. A more wide ranging history of the discipline would have helped students see a need to go beyond classical interpretations of St. Thomas. More treatment should have been given the relationship of the behavioral science to moral norms, theories of formation of conscience, the use of Scripture in moral theology and the liturgy and ethics. The text is heavily philosophical. Jesus as the foundation of our moral life is not explicitly treated until late in the text. Finally, students unfamiliar with Latin will have trouble with some of the footnotes.

My respect for this work is high. It does not oversimplify the challenges of revisionist thought but faces them with sustained scholarly arguments. The natural law theory May proposes harnesses the energy of the Catholic tradition. The advantage of using *An Introduction* is its brevity and clarity. My first year seminarians appreciated May's philosophical accuracy and theological insights. Every reader will.

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