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## Book Review

*Living the Good Life: What Every Catholic Needs to Know About Moral Issues*, by Mark Lowery (Ann Arbor, MI: Charis Books, Servant Publications, 2003). 237 p. \$10.95.

I will first offer a rather full summary of the book, make a few personal observations, and conclude with a final appraisal.

This book, which contains an introduction, nine chapters, and a conclusion, is in many ways a splendid commentary on Pope John Paul II's *Veritatis Splendor*. With the Pope, Lowery presents the Christian moral life as a matter of living a good life and of "reaping the incredible benefits of participating in [human] goods ordered under the highest good."

The first three chapters focus on the true meaning of freedom, its relationship to the truth and to conscience. With John Paul II Lowery opposes both *autonomy* (the idea that each individual is a law unto himself) and *heteronomy* (the legalistic concept that morality is a set of arbitrary rules imposed by some external authority to hinder us from doing as we please). Lowery, following the Holy Father, proposes a *participated theonomy*, i.e., the idea that the supreme norm of human life is God's eternal law, or what can be called his wise and loving plan of human existence, and that God has so made us that we can, under the gentle disposition of providence, come to an ever-deepening knowledge of this wise and loving plan through the natural law, which is our intelligent participation in God's eternal law (cf. *Dignitatis humanae*, 3). Conscience plays a role in our cognitive awareness of this wonderful plan, as Lowery amply shows.

Lowery notes that we can share in God's eternal law in two ways, first, through the natural law and second through the divine law made known to us through the divine revelation whose last word to us is Jesus Christ, the Word of God made man for our sake. Natural law's first directive is that *good is to be done and evil avoided*, and, Lowery says in company with Aquinas, even evil-doers seek to guide their actions according to this fundamental directive, since they do not do evil for the sake of evil but for the sake of some good apparent to them. Thus they rationalize their behavior by appealing to the good for whose sake they choose to do evil. Lowery goes on to show that the "good" is not a vacuous concept, for we can specify what is good. For Lowery (as well for Karol Wojtyła, the author of *Love and Responsibility*) the good most central for moral issues is the human person, who is always to be respected as an end and never to be treated as a mere means, as the personalistic principle

affirms. It is in light of this principle, Lowery believes, that we can show the truth of the specific precepts regarding our neighbor that we find in the Ten Commandments.

The fourth chapter shows how our existence as bodily beings fits into the natural law. Here Lowery provides a concise but accurate summary of key themes found in John Paul II's famous Wednesday audiences on the "theology of the body." Lowery nicely develops John Paul's notion of the "language of the body" and his concept of the "nuptial meaning" of the body. Effectively attacking the dualism so prevalent in our culture, Lowery emphasizes that we are composites of body and soul rather than souls possessing bodies or vice versa, that we *are* males and that we *are* females, not persons who simply "happen" to be male or female. Thus the male body is the sign of the gift of the male person to the female person and vice versa. Lowery shows how beautifully this gift is realized in marriage; how it is debased in non-marital sex and in contraception.

Chapter five focuses on God's law as revealed to us through Scripture and Tradition and faithfully guarded by the Magisterium. Lowery does a masterful job in exposing the flimsy arguments used by revisionist theologians to support their spurious claim that the Magisterium simply *cannot* propose specific moral norms infallibly. With *Lumen Gentium* 25 Lowery distinguishes carefully between truths *authoritatively* but not infallibly proposed, which we are to accept with a "religious submission of will and mind" and truths infallibly proposed. He goes on to note, with the Council Fathers, that truths of faith *and* morals can be infallibly proposed either by the extraordinary exercise of the Magisterium (solemn definitions by a council, for instance, or *ex cathedra* pronouncements of the Holy Father) *or* by the *ordinary and universal magisterium*. He shows that John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* clearly taught that the Church's teaching on the absolute inviolability of innocent human life from direct attack and on the intrinsically evil character of procured abortion and of euthanasia has been infallibly proposed by the *ordinary and universal Magisterium*. This chapter is a little gem in a fine work.

Chapter six takes up the issue of "disordered goods" and the "mystery of sin." Lowery clearly sets forth the conditions required for mortal sin, i.e., the kind of sin utterly incompatible with God's love and which therefore deprives us of his own divine life, namely, that the act must be seriously evil, the agent intend, i.e., freely choose, the act, and must know at the time he chooses to do it that it is gravely evil. In this chapter Lowery discusses the notion of "fundamental option," noting with John Paul II that there is a valid use of this expression insofar as our baptismal commitment or what John Paul II refers to in *Veritatis Splendor* 66 calls the "obedience of faith," that is, our choice, our commitment, to live *as Christians, as children of God*. But he goes on to show that the notion of "fundamental option"

proposed by dissenting theologians, a view he calls *radical fundamental option*, is simply incompatible with Catholic faith because it refuses to recognize that particular human acts (categorical choices) can indeed change our "option" to live in accord with our baptismal commitment.

Chapter seven is perhaps the most difficult in the book. It is concerned with the nature of the human act and the sources of its morality. With John Paul II, the Catholic tradition and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Lowery rightly maintains that there are three sources of the morality of a human act: the *object*, the *intention* (=end), and the *circumstances*. Lowery distinguishes between circumstances that are outside the act and what he calls *specifying circumstances* or *specifications* rather than circumstances, e.g., to have intercourse *with one's own wife* vs. to have intercourse *with one's child* (=incest), and he argues, rightly, that certain actions so specified (e.g., incest) are intrinsically evil and can *never be justified by intention or circumstances*. Lowery then offers a very intelligent critique of the proportionalist method of making moral judgments that was roundly condemned in *Veritatis Splendor*.

Chapter eight gets into "tough cases" such as those that occur when a pregnancy may endanger the mother's life, the use of lethal force in war, the death penalty, etc. Thus Lowery in this chapter sets forth such principles as the "principle of totality" and the "principle of double effect." He does a good job showing how dissenting theologians have grotesquely distorted both of these principles to advance their views, and he offers intelligent guidance in their use, in particular it seems to me in discussing the question of a just war, both *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*. In this chapter he also considers the very difficult question of cooperation in evil, clearly distinguishing between formal and material cooperation.

In chapters six through eight Lowery has been chiefly concerned with the "lower" limit of the Christian moral life: of identifying and avoiding the kinds of human acts that kill divine life or are inimical to it. In Chapter nine he wants to show that there are *no upper limits* to the Christian moral life, i.e., that we are called to be saints, and that God wants to help us in our struggle to become holy, as the heavenly Father is holy. He gives us the infused moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude and enables us to acquire them as well, and in addition He gives us His grace to enable us not only to know what we are to do but to do it.

In the conclusion of this fine book Lowery points to the Eucharist, where our Lord and Redeemer is present with us and for us. Christian moral life is in reality a *eucharistic life*, one nourished by Christ Himself, one in thanksgiving for His saving death and resurrection, one in union with Him.

I have some minor issues to note. The most serious error in the book is not so much Lowery's, as the 1994 edition of the *Catechism of the*

*Catholic Church*, for, following a definition of lie given in no. 2483, Lowery says (in chapter 7, p. 161) that “telling a falsehood to someone *who has no right to truth is not a lie.*” Unfortunately, this distinction between a permissible “falsehood” and a “lie” is *not* in the Catholic tradition but was made by the Protestant author Hugo Grotius and was taken up by dissenting theologians. Thus the Modifications of the *Catechism* in the 1997 definitive edition orders the offending sentence, which reads: “To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead into error someone who has the right to know the truth” changed to read: “To lie is to speak or act against the truth in order to lead someone into error.”

I think that in the chapter on natural law Lowery could have shown more clearly how to defend the truth of the precepts of the Decalogue had he, like John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* (there following St. Thomas), stressed that those precepts protect the inviolable dignity of the human person made in God’s image by protecting his *good, i.e., the various goods at the different levels of his being* (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 12-13). In the chapter on the moral object he could also more fruitfully have used the teaching of John Paul II in *Veritatis Splendor* 78 on identifying the moral object.

My concerns are really minor. The work is first rate and admirably achieves the author’s purpose of introducing readers to the “Church’s moral vision.” It reads very well, and one can see that the author must be an excellent teacher.

Readers should consult the author’s website (given in the Introduction) because on it they will find a valuable glossary of terms and a useful bibliography.

Lowery is to be thanked for this fine book.

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