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The Responsible Christian: A Popular Guide for Moral Decision Making According to Classical Tradition

by Vincent E. Rush

Loyola University Press, Chicago, Ill., 1984, xvii + 283 pp., \$9.95, Hardcover.

The author, a priest-professor of theology at the College of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota, believes that the neo-traditional moral theology which he has taught and which still exerts great influence on many Catholics is legalistic and pharisaical. Unyieldingly rigoristic in its insistence upon specific moral absolutes (e.g., it is *always* morally wrong to kill innocent persons, to contracept, to have sex outside of marriage), yet casuistically justifying by its principle of double effect the killings of some innocent beings (e.g., in ectopic pregnancies and in war), neo-traditional morality, in Rush's view, is a repressive and unchristian vision of the moral life, one which ultimately leads to Puritanism, which Rush characterizes as the fear that, right now, someone, somewhere, is enjoying himself.

While I believe that there are serious shortcomings in what Rush terms "neo-traditional" morality, his presentation of it is surely a caricature. Of more importance, however, is what Rush proposes to put in its place.

Rush contends that the moral theory he develops is a modern version of the "classical tradition" which was set forth most systematically in the past by St. Thomas Aquinas. Had Rush, in fact, produced in this work a contemporary and vigorous vision of the moral life along Thomistic lines, we could be very grateful to him. Unfortunately, as will be shown, what Rush offers is a grotesquely distorted version of St. Thomas's thought and a moral theory seriously at odds, in my judgment, with authentic Christian living.

Rush holds that the ultimate norm or standard of morality is human nature itself. But the human nature which, for him, is the ultimate standard of morality, is not what Aquinas called "common human nature," the real human nature subsisting in every individual human being of every age and clime, and knowable by human intelligence. Rather, for Rush, the human nature which is the ultimate norm of morality is each individual's own particularized "nature," with its unique determinations, proclivities, and possibilities, the "nature" shaped by genetic and environmental factors. With this individualized "nature" as his standard, Rush can then argue that for homosexually oriented individuals, it is sometimes morally right to choose freely to engage in homosexual acts. Similarly, the individually shaped "natures" of early Christian men and women and of contemporary Westernized men and women, call for monogamous marital relations, whereas the individually shaped "natures" of some Arctic and African peoples require polygamous unions. And Aquinas's moral theory, as outlined by Rush, is said to

support these claims.

Rush further maintains, again by invoking the authority of St. Thomas, that the only thing which makes the human moral agent good is the end intended by the agent. This, he claims, holds true even if the act chosen and executed by the agent might objectively be "wrong." Thus, so long as the end for whose sake the agent acts is noble and good, the moral being and character of the agent are morally good.

In addition, Rush holds that, for Aquinas, no specific moral norms (e.g., one ought not to kill the innocent) are universally true. The only universally true moral propositions are general norms such as *do not act unjustly*, but every specific norm admits of exceptions, and it is the work of virtue, in particular the virtue of prudence, to determine when specific norms apply and when they do not.

Rush's method of making moral decisions, which he alleges to be that of St. Thomas, can be summarized as follows: do not violate your individualized, unique nature; have in mind an end that is noble and good; take into account all the circumstances and the social consequences of your actions, assessing them particularly in terms of their long-range effects; and act in accordance with your own conscience. If one resolutely acts in this way, he maintains, one will be acting responsibly, will be acting as Jesus would, and will be acting in a way which accords with the "classical tradition" represented by St. Thomas.

I suggest that Rush's method provides us with no clear norms or moral guidance and that it issues in the "new morality" with which we are so familiar. I also claim that his invocation of Aquinas is grossly misrepresentative of St. Thomas's thought. Aquinas, first of all, did not make individualized human nature the ultimate norm of morality. In fact he did not, as did Suarez and the "neo-traditional" moralists who frequently read Aquinas through Suarezian glasses, make nature the norm at all. Rather, he taught that there are certain basic goods of the human person, — goods toward which we are naturally inclined. These goods, when grasped by intelligence, function as first or basic principles of the practical reason (cf. ST 1-2, 94, 2). He likewise taught that there are certain basic requirements of practical reasonableness, such as the Golden Rule, the injunction to do no evil to anyone (cf., e.g., ST 1-2, 100, 3), and that from these common and universal precepts of practical reason, one could, with little thought, conclude to the universal truth of certain specific norms, such as those proscribing adultery (understood as coition with someone who is not one's spouse), the slaying of the innocent, etc. (cf. ST 1-2, 100, 8 and Patrick Lee's fine article, "The Permanence of the Ten Commandments: St. Thomas and His Modern Commentators," *Theological Studies*, 42, 1981, pp. 422-443).

In accordance with his morality of principles, St. Thomas clearly taught, contrary to Rush, that specific sorts of human actions are *secundum se mala* (evil in themselves) and thus the sorts or kinds of acts that simply cannot be made right by any kinds of circumstances or good intentions (cf., e.g., ST 2-2, 64, 5 and 6, on suicide and killing of innocents; 110, on lying; 154, 7, 8, and 11 on rape, adultery, contraception and homosexual acts).

In addition, Aquinas did not say that a person is morally good only by reason of the end intended. To the contrary, he explicitly taught (e.g., ST 1-2, 20, 2) that the will (and thus the person) is good or bad not only by reason of the end intended, but also by reason of the means chosen (on this entire matter, see my "Aquinas and Janssens on the Moral Meaning of Human Acts," *The Thomist*, 48, 1984, pp. 566-606).

You will recall that Rush, in his invective against "neo-traditional" morality, rejected the principle of double effect as a specious form of reasoning. Yet this principle, although not formulated in its present way by Aquinas, is rooted in Thomistic concepts, in particular, the moral significance of the difference between

what is directly intended, i.e., within the scope of one's intention, and what is not directly intended, i.e., not within the scope of one's intention (on cf. ST 2-2. 64, 7).

From what has been said thus far, it should be clear that the moral theory set forth by Rush in this book is a far cry from the "classical tradition" of St. Thomas. I think it also a far cry from the morality rooted in the scriptures and proclaimed by the Church. Although the work may have been well intended and although it reflects, in places, a generous Christian heart (especially in sections dealing with social issues), it is a sorry guide to moral decision-making. It is a smoothly written work, rich in rhetoric and persuasive; thus, one hopes that readers will be able to ferret out its sophisms and pseudo-appeals to the authority of St. Thomas.

— William E. May
The Catholic University of America

Come Journey with Me

by Russell C. Packard

Affirmation Books, Whitinsville, Md., 1984.

A physician who is a long professed ethicist, believing only in the power of science, discovers spiritual stirrings after the death of a patient. These experiences lead ultimately to conversion to the Catholic Church and ordination to the permanent diaconate. Sounds like a 1930s movie, doesn't it?

Instead, this is a short and very personal journal account of the few years involved in Dr. Packard's journey to the Church and the altar. In the course of the journey, he encounters many people who assist him to realize the working of God's grace in his life. Perhaps the most important message of the book is that he becomes faithful to God by responding to the needs of other people and to the inspiration these people offer us.

While many parts of the book are interesting, I thought the difficulties Packard experienced in prayer were most interesting. As he expressed frustration and lack of progress, I wanted to say to him, "Hang in there; prayer will come in time."

Though Packard expresses the conflict that arises due to the need for physicians to make large sums of money in order to buy equipment and support a practice, he does not investigate explicitly the values of medicine in relation to the values of faith. In this relationship lies the solution to many problems of frustration he expresses; for example, the healing through science and healing through prayer; the image of the physician in contemporary society; the role of a deacon-physician in the Church.

Those who enjoy personal stories of conversion and its attendant difficulties will find the book rewarding.

— Kevin O'Rourke, O.P., Director
Center for Health Care Ethics
St. Louis University Medical Center

FIGHTING FOR LIFE:

Defending the Newborn's Right to Live

by Linda Delahoyde

Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1984, 81 pp., \$3.95, paperback.

DEATH IN THE NURSERY:

The Secret Crime of Infanticide

by James Manney and John C. Blattner

Servant Books, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1984, 210 pp., \$5.95, paperback.

Both of these books have a common purpose — to alert the public to the fact that handicapped newborns have been deliberately killed, to examine and criticize the assumptions used to justify killing them, to defend their right to live and to equitable treatment, and to propose strategies for protecting their rights and valuing their lives as human persons.

Delahoyde's book, although quite brief, is both poignant and effective. About the time that "Baby Doe," a Down's syndrome child, was starved to death in Bloomington, Indiana when that state's supreme court ratified his parents' choice to refuse life-saving treatment because of the alleged poor quality of his life, Mrs. Delahoyde became pregnant for the first time. Her own child, Will, is, like "Baby Doe," afflicted with Down's Syndrome. Her book is an eloquent tribute to the humanity, the dignity and the personhood of children who may be handicapped. Several chapters in her book show what can be done for such children, in particular those with Down's syndrome and spina bifida, to help them and their parents cope with the difficulties they experience. But it is above all a straightforward unmasking of the evasive euphemisms and specious rationalizations used by those who think such children are better off dead. As Delahoyde shows so clearly, these children are, in fact, protected by the 14th amendment of the U.S. Constitution and pertinent civil rights laws. Nonetheless, as she likewise observes, there is the danger, already reflected in certain court decisions regarding "wrongful birth" and, most especially, "wrongful life" cases, to remove from these human subjects the equal protection of the law against homicide. Her book is thus a challenge to all to be alert to this danger and vigilant in meeting it.

Her work is likewise a splendid analysis of the dehumanizing attitudes toward the handicapped, particularly among some members of the medical community. It concludes with a challenge for all of us to take practical, effective steps in bringing compassionate and useful help to families of handicapped children.

The book by Manney and Blattner is a more thorough-going investigative report and analysis of the "secret crime of infanticide." In addition to providing factual accounts of several well-known (e.g., the Bloomington "Baby Doe" case) and not

so well known (e.g., the scandalous situation in Oklahoma concerning pina bifida infants) instances of infanticide, they present at more length the rationalizations used to justify the killing of "defective" newborns — a killing often linked by the claim that such infants have been "allowed to die." As they show, two principal lines of argument have been employed. The first, championed by such writers as Joseph Fletcher, Michael Tooley, and Peter Singer, proposes that newborns are not persons and, as nonpersons, do not have legally protectable rights. The second, favored by many in the medical community (Duff and Campbell, for instance) and by such ethicists as Albert Jonsen and Marvin Kohler, focuses on the "quality of the expected life" of the infants and issues in a judgment that certain infants (and, by implication, other human beings) are in such bad shape that they would be better off dead than alive. Manney and Blattner note that this second, quality-of-anticipated-life approach, has been given great respectability in the ethical and medical communities because it has been endorsed by Richard A. McCormick, the Jesuit professor of bioethics at the prestigious Kennedy Krieger Medical Center for Bioethics at Georgetown University. While it is true that McCormick himself would be very restrictive in the use of this criterion, it nonetheless remains true that he has said that "it is the kind of, the quality of the life thus lived (painful, poverty-stricken and deprived, away from homes and friends, and an excessive hardship for the individual" (emphasis McCormick's. Cf. his *How Brave a New World?*, p. 347). The inference here, of course, is that individuals whose quality of life is of this kind would be better off dead, and, as the authors show conclusively, this inference has been drawn by many today, particularly in the pediatric community.

Manney and Blattner oppose both these lines of argumentation (or is *rationalization* a better term?) to justify the killing, usually by "benign neglect" of handicapped infants. For them, such infants, as indubitable members of the human species, are persons endowed with the same rights as other persons. They do not argue to support this position, but it is certainly one that is at the heart of civilization, and is a position capable of being defended philosophically. Here I might suggest the pertinence of Mortimer Adler's important work, *The Difference of Man and the Difference It Makes*, to this issue.

The final part of the Manney-Blattner book is concerned with strategies to secure the rights of newborns to life and appropriate medical treatment. In this part they provide a good account of the struggle, led by Dr. C. Everett Koop as Surgeon General, to formulate regulations designed to afford newborn infants the protection of the law. They believe that the "Principles of Treatment of Handicapped Infants," accepted in principle by the presidents of the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Association of Children's Hospitals, the two organizations which had successfully blocked regulations drawn up in the immediate wake of the Bloomington Baby Doe case, are a good starting point, but they stress that much more needs to be done. In particular, they argue that it is essential to change the attitudes of doctors, and those in medical schools, toward handicapped individuals. They fear — and their fear seems to be well-based by the documentation they provide — that a utilitarian attitude toward human life is beginning, or has already begun to, take root within the medical community and, in particular, in medical schools. It seems to me that the issues this raises are of particular concern to readers of *Linacre Quarterly*. *Verbum sapienti sufficit*.

In conclusion, both of these books are informative, challenging, and sobering accounts of the current danger of medically approved infanticide.

— William E. May
Associate Professor of Moral Theology
The Catholic University of America

Linacre Quarterly

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