

May 1987

Catholic Moral Theology Today

Michael Allsopp

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Allsopp, Michael (1987) "Catholic Moral Theology Today," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 54 : No. 2 , Article 5.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol54/iss2/5>

Catholic Moral Theology Today

Rev. Michael Allsopp

Father Allsopp holds degrees from St. Patrick's College, Sydney, Australia; Gregorian University, Rome (doctorate in theology, summa cum laude); and Gonzaga University. He is an assistant professor in the theology department at Creighton University.

Christian ethics must be elaborated in such a way that its starting point is Jesus Christ.

- Hans Urs von Balthasar

There is an ancient Chinese saying that runs, "May you live in interesting times." When I first heard that saying 20 years ago, I did not understand why it embodied a curse, not a blessing. Today, I do. As we turn toward the final decade of this century, the titles coined just after WWII to describe the times—Romano Guardini's "Post Modern World," for instance—appear too kind. We have done the impossible, thought the unthinkable; the incredible has become evening T.V.

Not since the days of Augustine and Leo has the Church witnessed such change and controversy. In 200 years' time, when another Newman reaches the final chapter of his *Tracts for the Times*, how will he view John XXIII and Paul VI, the liturgical movement and the biblical renewal? Will he defend those who sought to build the "secular city" within the shadow of St. Peter's, or decry the leaders of the catechetical revival for insisting upon "the importance of being relevant"? The winds of the Spirit have been as cold as the Arctic to millions who look at the schools closed, the pews empty, the friendships destroyed by the bitter debates, the paths taken. As the Church in America moves into quieter waters, it may be useful to study the current state of moral theology, the developments that have taken place during the last 40 years, the strengths and weaknesses, the contributions to that quest for truth about Christian life, work and love in this age. Confusion about the "new Catholic morality" disrupted millions of homes during the 60s. It would be tragic if confusion and misunderstanding continued to reign throughout the 90s.¹

The Dominant Approaches: Their Leading Ideas

Readers who keep in touch with the *Hastings Center Report*, *Nursing*, will be well-aware of utilitarianism's place in medical and nursing ethics.

and the open debates between advocates of "best interests" and the defenders of absolute rights, promises, deontological theories, whether derived from Kant or Aquinas. The deep divisions on such issues as nutrition and hydration for the comatose, or on aggressive treatment of infants with *spina bifida*, are clearly due to disagreements about the centrality of such factors as "quality of life" or the "impact on family/society" in decision-making. Rule utilitarians and deontologists, usually philosophical rather than theological (out of respect for the widespread convention that views the introduction of theological beliefs as divisive and confusing), dominate the field. Similar, but different methods and approaches battle for supremacy in Catholic moral theology today.

Since the publication of Bernard Haring's monumental series, *The Law of Christ* (1954), the best-known manual influenced by the Tübingen School, the understanding of the Christian life as life-in-Christ, discipleship, living by the Sermon on the Mount, three separate approaches to Christian ethics have become obvious in Catholic circles. Each is a definite response, as well as an anticipation of the recommendation in the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatam Totius*, that "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." Each approach embodies the results of the Catholic renewal in biblical studies, the influence of classical as well as recent movements in philosophy, the impact upon theology of the 20th century sciences, sociology and developmental psychology, the contributions to ethics of Max Scheler, Fritz Tillmann, Karl Rahner, to name just the most important.

Exponent of Personalist Ethics

Louis Janssens, emeritus professor of moral theology at the University of Louvain, is a well-known, internationally respected exponent of personalist ethics, and the following summary illustrates the characteristic features of this first approach. We will examine its theological and philosophical foundations, its historical roots, and its strengths and weaknesses. The "personalist" approach in ethics, like the "natural law" or "situationist" approaches, takes its name from its starting point and determining criterion, namely, the human person. For exponents of this way of doing Christian ethics, a morally correct action is one which corresponds objectively to the human person considered in the light of reason and faith. Personalist theologians believe that God's revelation about human life, about marriage and virtue, has been made known not only to those who have been immortalized in the writings of the Bible, but to others: all who have made lasting contributions to our knowledge of the human person. Personalism, therefore, listens to Freud, sifts the writing of

Heidegger, is sensitive to the insights of feminist theology. Personalism uses descriptive analyses to uncover the central characteristics of the person, the phenomenological method, psychoanalysis, Rahner's transcendentalism.²

The central norm of personalist ethics runs as follows: each and every person should fulfill himself/herself according to his/her personal originality. This norm follows from the basic insight of this approach, that the foundation of morality is the significance of the person, that moral judgments are constructs that express individual or collective decisions about the fitting or unfitting actions of persons. Ethics, for personalists, is the art/science that strives to describe authentic human behavior, what is right and wrong for persons, to develop valid and general knowledge. However, since the person, by definition, is a singular and unique reality, not simply in numerical terms but existentially, personalism emphasizes that each person is fulfilled by following his/her own path, responding to his/her distinctive call, perfecting his/her gifts. Christian morality, according to Janssens, should not be seen as a system of universal generalizations, binding without variation upon every individual. By our being, we are "persons"—unique and original subjects. We are not "rational animals." *Human nature* is inaccurate as the starting point of ethics. The "person" is a relational and intentional reality, open to the world, and incarnate spirit (as Gabriel Marcel wrote), a bodily person who exists in history and in time. That I am *this* woman living in *these* United States during these years, that I have *these* skills and *this* husband and *this* child, are not "accidents", in the minds of personalists, but integral to myself as "person"—as this "self" called to be and become, by grace, the unique individual whom God, from eternity, intended me to be.

Ethics deals with persons. It is interested in human actions as expressions of persons, and as impacting upon persons, their growth and self-realization. In the realm of sexual activity, therefore, personalists assess behavior in terms of what experience tells us leads to personal realization. The ethically wrong is the personally dehumanizing, defeating, and the personally unfitting. Personalism does not build its ethical judgments upon the inherent finality of the sexual act as such, nor sub systems in themselves. Whether or not this behavior will promote the self-realization of this person is the concern.³

Obviously, the Personalist way of doing ethics reflects many features found in contemporary medical and nursing practice. It is specific, rather than general. It strives to meet individual criteria rather than broad regulations. It is sympathetic to cultural differences, to individual preferences and circumstances. It recognizes that each client is unique, not simply one of a herd, a class or a mass; that no two cancers are identical. In the area of conjugal and sexual morality, for instance, personalism is aware that age and health, cultural and personal aspects, must be given their place, and that just as a number of specific ethical norms have been replaced by newer ones, due to the better understanding of sexuality

achieved; these in turn may be put aside by more adequate insights. Flexibility and adaptability, trial and error, progress toward perfection—these are characteristics of the personalist approach.⁴

Council Supported Personalist Ethics

The Second Vatican Council, the *magna charter* for the Church, clearly supported the personalist way of doing ethics. In the famous Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), for example, the Council accepted that the criterion to be used in judging the rightness or wrongness of human conduct in marriage was “the person integrally and adequately considered” not “the intention of nature inscribed in the organs and their functions.” This document begins with the question, “What does the Church think of man?” In its statements about society, culture, the apostolate of the laity, or the right to an education, everywhere the Council speaks about the *person*. In taking this approach, the Council, as in numerous other ways, was returning to the New Testament, in particular the Pauline way of ethical analysis where the theological belief in the person as the “image of God” provides the starting point, and there is recognition of individuality, personal gifts (Paul’s own celibacy, for example), and that problems such as remaining married to an unbeliever or being divorced are settled in personal terms. “You are called to peace,” is Paul’s central consideration, and this is a personalist principle.

Supporters of this way of doing ethics, however, have their critics. First, the fact that ethics begins with the person, a unique reality, reverses the traditional categories “human nature” and “rational animal,” and, in some minds, undermines the unity of ethical knowledge. Second, critics consider the personalist formulation of “personal” knowledge another reversal of classical philosophy, and a pursuit doomed to failure, since all meaningful knowledge, by definition, is universal rather than individual, and becomes personal by a process of deduction and application from the general. While “Know thyself” is an ancient axiom of ethics, the personalist has given it a knowledge-destroying twist, opponents insist. Third, there is some serious doubt about the fruitfulness of the personalist method of analysis, namely, its commitment to refining the personal through study of the person, the singular manifestation of the divine-in-reality. Is it really possible, it is asked, to produce a reliable body of knowledge about the human person from reflection upon the person? Surely, comes the claim, sooner or later, it is imperative that personalists look to Christ, to revealed truth, in order to discover what is authentic personhood, or at least to confirm and sustain the findings of analysis. Personalism is selfish and self-centered, in the view of critics. It is subjective, anti-social, anti-nomian (where is the rule of nature, law or custom), and encourages autonomy before authority, independent freedom rather than interdependent responsibility.

As Thomas Ogletree has stated in his volume on *The Use of the Bible in Christian Ethics* (1983), the tendency to overstate our control over the

direction of our own development as persons, to take insufficient note of the role relationships play in human selfhood, and the secondary place given to social good, are characteristic weaknesses of all perfectionist theories in ethics, and personalism cannot escape them. To assess the morality of sexual activity in terms of personal or interpersonal self-realization, that alone, seems myopic, even if appealing to listeners inherently individualistic. While Mill's effort failed, the utilitarian emphasis on "best interests" seems closer to the spirit of the Gospel and its depiction of life as service, than the personalist vision of life as growth in selfhood. It is too Greek in its focus. Finally, since ethics seeks to find order in free human actions, a preferable starting point seems to be human action, rather than the person. God is the proper center of theology, it is argued, and the human act is the center of ethics—not the person.

Christocentrism in Catholic Moral Theology

To be a Christian means to imitate and follow Christ. In a 1960 essay on the value of the teaching of Jesus for the 20th century, William Barclay made the following statement which captures the spirit and thrust of the second approach dominant in Catholic moral theology today. Barclay wrote, "One of the main features of the Christian ethic lies in the demand for imitation. Men are to imitate Jesus. Peter says that Jesus left us an example that we should follow in His steps (1 Peter 2:21). The word he uses for example is *hupogrammos*, and *hupogrammos* was the word for the perfect line of copperplate handwriting at the top of the page of a child's exercise-book, the line which had to be copied. So then the Christian has to copy Jesus. And it is Paul's demand that the Christian should imitate God—and after all, is this not a reasonable demand since man, as the Bible sees it, is made in the image and the likeness of God (Ephesians 5:1; Genesis 1:26, 27)? Here lies the theological foundation, and for its exponents, the major justification, for this way of doing ethics, whether in the health care, business or private spheres or marriage and family living.⁵

We are all individual members of the "body of Christ" and share in Christ's own life. Christ, while a person Himself, is also a "corporate person," since in Him we live, move and have our being. Further, Christ is Omega, as well as Alpha, not only the source of all creation, but its goal. Given these basic, metaphysical truths, it follows that Christ is the beginning and end of Christian ethics, and that "the human act" as well as the "person," for all their insights, are inappropriate as the foundational reality of Christian ethics. While natural law ethics and personalism are not totally separate from Christocentric ethics, there are distinctive differences. A genuine Christian ethic takes its stand upon the Christian revelation, that added deeper or wider insight into reality which has been communicated throughout time, we believe with the author of the Fourth Gospel, but primarily and uniquely in the Word-made flesh. Christian ethics is God-centered rather than man-centered, both in its dependence upon faith rather than reason, as well as its belief that Christ is the criterion

of morality rather than the inherent intention of nature inscribed in organs or faculties, or "the person integrally and adequately considered."⁶

The Christocentric approach in Catholic moral theology emphasized the unity between the Catholic vision of reality (God, Christ, Church, Mary, sacraments) and the Catholic understanding of life. It looks upon Jesus as supreme teacher of righteousness/holiness, as depicted in Matthew's gospel, for instance, and definitive model, as seen in the Gospel of John. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7) holds a special place in this ethics, as does Jesus' dealing with the Samaritan woman, children, Peter. Jesus' instructions to His disciples are viewed, by some theorists, as binding on all believers, while for others, Christ's love (agape) is the characteristic mark of true discipleship. The morality taught by Jesus and illustrated by Him—this is Christian ethics.⁷

Ethicist Defines Christianity

Jesuit ethicist George Lobo presents this way of doing ethics in these words: "Christianity is not an adherence to a doctrine nor an observance of an ethical code, but the *personal following* of Christ, the God-man. Jesus Himself prayed for His disciples: 'And this is eternal life: that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.'" (Jn. 17:3) Christ is the prototype according to which we are all created and to which we must all conform, Lobo writes. Although we cannot reproduce the historical existence of Jesus, we can imitate or relive, each in his own way, the pattern of His life in our situation today. We are called to love our neighbor as He loved us (Jn. 13:34). For the Christian, to live (Lobo states) is to "put on Christ" (Rom. 13:14). Finally, Christ becomes our supreme "law" not so much because He sets external norms of action for us, as because He gives us the inner capacity of being conformed to Him. He gives us His Spirit.⁸

Besides the internal strength it embodies, this approach enjoys a history second to none in Catholic ethics. Clearly, the evangelists and Paul were conscious of this way of moral education, and throughout the centuries, millions have accepted the belief of John Stuart Mill that Christian morality is to live in such a way that Christ would approve our lives. Gandhi saw the Christian ethics in Christ and His sermon. Who has denied that Jesus was a moral genius? Who has seriously doubted that He is the Christian's final moral authority?

In spite of the classic objections to ethics based on imitation, that authenticity and autonomy are impaired, supporters of this approach stress its dynamic features, its emphasis on growth, and that properly understood modeling strengthens authenticity and autonomy by providing valuable ideals and exemplars. The healing and reconciling activity of Christ, His passionate concern for people, His forgiveness of injury, His sensitivity, provide guidance and concrete insight into authentic personhood. Conformity to Christ and integrity to self are not inherently contradictory. When applied carefully, with adequate respect

for cultural and developmental differences, the precise meanings of words and language structures (that a parable, for instance, and a discourse embody differences which have a great bearing upon the writer's intended meaning), Jesus' own non-violent style of life, His associations with sinners, can provide useful ethical guidance for us. As Paul told the Ephesians, the love of Christ for His Church stands as a lasting lesson for husbands, while his compassion for the leper may serve as a model of ethically correct interactivity with those afflicted with psychiatric disorders, AIDS or other socially-divisive and frightening conditions of our time. Administrators and personnel directors are able to find in Christ, in His understanding and willingness to turn error into asset, features which will insure that policies and conditions are truly ethical. As William Barclay said in the essay mentioned above, the keynote of the Christian ethic is concern and that concern is embodied in Jesus Christ and is the expression of the very life and heart of God. "It is a concern that knows neither boundaries nor limits. It is expressed in the life of the world; and in the world it is purified and inspired by the continuous memory that life is lived in the presence and in the power of Jesus Christ."⁹

For personalists, however, as well as for those who belong to the final group of moral theologians at whom we will look, the Christocentric approach has its flaws. Rudolf Schnackenburg has touched upon some of the major problems in looking at the Gospel vision of human life.¹⁰ Denis Kenny, in his valuable volume, *The Christian Future: A Strategy for Catholic Renewal* (1971), does not ignore the difficulties inherent in this approach. Jesus was always Lord, and always transcendent, critics stress. An ethics based on imitation dangerously narrows the gulf between savior and sinner, God and the "weak, thinking reed."

Actualism in Moral Theology

All who have been trained in Catholic health care ethics, who know the meaning of expressions such as "double effect" and "extraordinary means," the standard reasons why a lie, suicide, contraception, are morally wrong, will appreciate the logic and inherent cogency of the final approach I will look at—Actualism (as I term it). Central to this view of ethics is the belief, accepted by theorists expressing the classical worldview, that morality is located not in the "person" nor in "Christ," but rather in the object or *finis operis* of individual human acts. Since the universe is a "cosmos," and realities are "substances" and "accidents," stable unities of "essences" and "existences," solid arguments can be built in support of the basic principle that it is morally wrong to act contrary to nature, the natural function of an organ or faculty, the perceived goal (*finis*) of an action. This order is a manifestation of the Creator's design, His will and purpose. Thus, sight has been given to us for seeing, speech for making known the truth, sexual organs for the generation and education of children, and should be used for these purposes. While we human agents possess free will, and have been given sovereignty and authority

("increase, multiply, fill the earth and make it yours"), nevertheless we are co-creators, not autonomous initiators; sharers in responsibility; stewards who should respect the limits established by the Creator. Since these "patterns" are God-given, to act against them means disobedience, sin—acting like Adam, the first disturber of Eden's peace and harmony.

Such thinking is evident in Catholic medical ethics, in its analysis of sexual ethics, even the recent debates about "ontic evil" and "pre-moral evil." While characteristic of Max Scheler, his value-ethics, William E. May's most recent argument about the immorality of birth control falls into this way of understanding behavior, the criteria for ethical judgments.¹¹ The approach is conspicuous in the following statement of John Connery, S.J.: "I believe that human conduct should be measured against norms arrived at by the human mind reflecting on the nature and meaning, the purpose and inherent features of such conduct."¹² Long in history, enjoying impressive extrinsic authority throughout the years, actualism still has its impressive features and its able champions.

In the opinion of Norbert Rigali, S.J., professor of moral theology, University of San Diego, however, moral theology can no longer define itself as a "scientia theologica de actibus deliberatis."¹³ The contemporary worldview, the fields of quantum physics and sub-atomic chemistry, cannot be identified with the cosmology of Aristotle or Dante, their psychology or ethics. Moral theology must redefine itself today, according to Rigali, as a science of the Christian life, must seek the meaning of human acts in the context of a personal existence located within history. Natural law should not be looked upon still as materialized in organs or systems, in concrete and permanent "ends" of actions. In a modern view, natural law is seen as referring directly and primarily to human life, personal existence, as "the unity and whole that it is rather than to human acts or even the sum-total of human acts." If the "natural law" is anything, if it is to regain the place Aquinas gave it, it must be understood as the "law of being and becoming."

David F. Kelly, in his historical and methodological study on *The Emergence of Roman Catholic Medical Ethics in North America* (1979), has provided some further criticisms of the actualist approach in Catholic moral theology. Citing Louis Dupre and Ambrogio Valsecchi, as well as Louis Janssens, John Dedek and Daniel Maguire, Kelly illustrates the limitations and weaknesses, the confusion between biological structure and human nature. He closes his analysis with an outline of the theological principles which, in his mind, better preserve their character of mystery and their proper role as interpretative themes for approaching the meaning of human life.

Given the influence of phenomenology in philosophy, however, the appeal in speaking about the "integrity" or "truth" of human activity, the support in academic circles for the thesis that we talk through our behavior (the sexual act "speaks" of love, for instance), the Catholic case against contraception, *in vitro* fertilization, incomplete sexual activity inside or

outside marriage, made on actualist lines, will endure for years, resist displacement (as it did in the final phase of the drafting of *Humanae Vitae*) and have its advocates. There is strength in its clarity, appeal in its definiteness—especially when intellectuals are searching for black and white arguments.¹⁴

Conclusion

Moral theology has felt the strong winds of Vatican II more than the other theological disciplines. The response to the recommendation of the Council that it be given special attention has been worldwide, engaging the best minds in the Church. While its current state causes genuine concern and anxiety, polarization and division between progressives and conservatives, nevertheless, it is evident that in its Scriptural foundations, its orientation and its emphasis on rigorous scientific method, Catholic moral theology today better addresses and strives to better understand human life and the human agent, the diversity and complexity of the Christian vision of existence—the many strands of which it is formed, that, as Romano Guardini said, are often “incredibly independent not to say downright contradictory, yet all working toward the realization of a common ultimate fulfillment”—eternal life.

References

1. For an invaluable study of the impact of the Council on the American Church, Avery Dulles, “Vatican II and the American Experience of Church,” in *Vatican II: Open Questions and New Horizons*, edited by Gerald M. Fagin, Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1984, pp. 38-57.
2. For a useful outline of Janssens’s ethics, Louis Janssens, “Personalist Morals,” *Louvain Studies*, 3 (1970), pp. 5-16.
3. For an illustration of personalism in the area of sexual ethics, Francis W. Nichols, “Sexuality Fully Human,” *Furrow*, (March 1983), pp. 128-141.
4. Many will be interested in Janssens’s application of his approach to *in vitro* fertilization in his study on the morality of AIH, AID, etc. in *Louvain Studies* (1980)
5. For William Barclay’s essay, “The Characteristics of the Christian Ethic in the Teaching of Jesus,” in *Christian Ethics for Today*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1971), pp. 27-42.
6. That Christian ethics, in health care, in the areas of justice, by definition should be a genuine theological ethics, has not always been remembered. Aristotle rather than Jesus, reason rather than faith, Cartesian clarity, have reigned, as critics have written for a hundred years. For a fine statement about the differences between philosophical and theological ethics, Raphael T. Waters, “The Relationship of Moral Philosophy to Moral Theology,” *Listening* (Fall, 1983), pp. 235-244.
7. The support for this way of developing morality is clear in the following, opening statement of a study, “What Did Jesus Say About Divorce and Remarriage?” by James Young in *Catholic Charismatic* (June/July 1978), pp. 18-22, where we find, “Christians are people who pattern their lives after the person and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth.”

8. For this summary, George V. Lobo, *Guide to Christian Living: A New Compendium of Moral Theology*, (Westminister: Christian Classics, Inc., 1985), pp. 107-124.
 9. Barclay, *op. cit.*, p. 42.
 10. For these comments, Rudolf Schnackenburg, *Christian Existence in the New Testament*, Volume I, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), pp. 99-127.
 11. For May's statement, "Contraception Against 'Authentic Good'" in Letters, *America* (July 12, 1986), p. 20.
 12. These words are taken from John R. Connery, "Sexual Morality," *Catholic Charismatic* (June/July 1978), pp. 23-26.
 13. In the chapter, "Christ and Morality," in *Readings in Moral Theology No. 2*, ed. by Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), pp. 111-120.
 14. Somewhat ironically, and contrary to Kelly's general thesis, the positive and scientific features of US actualist medical ethics have been given strong support by psychiatrist Coleen Clements in her study "Psychiatry in the Land of Ethics: Landmarks and Landmines," *Psychiatric Annals* (July, 1986), pp. 395-398.
-