

In the Service of Charity and Truth

Essays in Honour of Lucius Ugorji

Edited by Uzochukwu Jude Njoku
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EXTRACT



PETER LANG

Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften

The History of Catholic Moral Theology

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The history of Catholic moral theology is best understood through its historical development which can be divided into seven, basically sequential periods. They are: (1) Patristics; (2) the *penitentials*; (3) scholasticism; (4) the confessional manuals; (5) casuistry; (6) the moral manuals; and, (7) contemporary moral theology.

(1) Moral theologians know little about the early church moral teachings. For the most part, patristic scholars and social historians like Peter Brown and Wayne Meeks have written extensively on this period, but unfortunately few moral theologians attend to this research.

Key to the early Christians was their developing Christology. In his study of the early Church, Gedaliahu Stroumsa claims that integrating the divinity and humanity of Christ was the major theological task and accomplishment of the early Church: Christ had to be the possessor of two natures but remain one single persona.

This achievement took practical significance in the ascetical imitation of Christ that called Christians to seek for themselves a unified self: as Christ brought divinity and humanity into one, Christians were called to bring body and soul together. Integration became a key moral task for all early Christians. Thus, while the interiority of the believer was stressed, the outward expression of that interiority was equally emphasized: the love of Christ was concretely expressed in the works of mercy.

Christians were also called to be imitators of Christ not only in his person, but in his relationship to the Trinity. Made in his image, Christians were constitutively related to all of humanity. But in Christ they were called to an even deeper relationship: as baptized they were called to be brothers and sisters to one another, to be one in Christ. Strife among people and between churches became the two most evident signs of Christian moral failure in the world.

Still even in their brokenness, early Christians lived out their call to discipleship in the community of the emerging church, where the horizon of expectations was constantly being shaped by the community's understanding of the kingdom. The moral life was, then, a response to the Word of God; in particular, it was an application of the rhetoric of preaching to the ordinary life.

The moral life of the early church was innovative. For instance, Brown describes how wealthy Christian widows were benefactors of the early church. Instead of relinquishing their inheritances to a second husband, Christian widows did not remarry and used their funds to support the ministry of the early church. Eventually their daughters imitated their mothers by committing themselves to perpetual virginity, a completely new state of life. These Christ-bearing exemplars were the embodiment of Christian generosity.

(2) In the sixth century, the practice of confessing one's sins developed. Throughout Celtic lands, local spiritual leaders, usually abbots cultivated this practice among their monks, and occasionally extended the practice to some of the devout local nobility.

These leaders attempted to assign appropriate penance tariffs of prayer, fasting, and abstinence for all the sins confessed in the particular abbeys. Eventually they began to write down these assigned penances with a framework organized around the seven deadly sins. Abbots took into account not only the sin itself, but its degree of gravity, the frequency with which the penitent committed it, and the state of life of the confessing penitent. Equity was the overall goal of the *penitentials*, but equity was established very locally. What one abbot thought should be the penalty for one monk who was repeatedly too drunk to sing the office, might not be the same as what another abbot in another abbey would assign to a similar monk, but each abbey had its own same penance for the same sin so as to be confident in a penitential fairness of the abbot. Eventually the practice of individual regular confessions spread throughout Ireland and the British Isles and into northern Europe. These *penitentials* later became the foundational texts for the more developed, but also more problematic *confessional manuals*. Unlike them, the *penitentials* were for those Christians already dedicated to the practice of prayer and the works of mercy. Their confession of sins was within a life of devotion.

(3) Scholasticism emerged in the twelfth century in the midst of a variety of vigorous movements. At that time, church leaders began to codify personal rights and procedures and through these codifications, canon law becomes articulated. Towns started to define themselves and cathedrals rose up in their centers. Universities began to flourish in Paris, Oxford, Bologna, Padua, Cologne and Montpellier. The twelfth century became a time of enormous spiritual reawakening: a deep fascination with the human as in the image of God animated the thought of Richard of St. Victor, Bernard of Clairvaux, and Hildegard of Bingen, among others. These devotional insights inevitably led to charismatic figures like Dominic, Francis, Clare and their followers. Within the context of these evangelical movements celebrating the human as the image of God, painters like Cimabue, Duccio, and Giotto inaugurated the Renaissance. Inasmuch as the human is in the

image of God, the teaching of the incarnation concerning the becoming of Christ as a human being became the central truth of Christianity.

From the twelfth through the sixteenth century, the scholastics or schoolmen investigated ways of expressing faith through reason. Inasmuch as theology was seen as a science investigating God and humanity, morality specifically studied humanity as lovingly responding to the initiative of God. This study was highly anthropological and, naturally, depended on the virtues to outline an appropriate moral identity for the Christian disciple.

Among the major scholastics was Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274). Like most scholastics, Aquinas' investigations were primarily theological and here Aquinas' theology was, like most medieval figures, pre-eminently Augustinian. Early in his studies, Aquinas read Aristotle as part of the Renaissance revival. Into his Augustinian theology, Aquinas employed philosophy, particularly Aristotle's, as both a cohesive and a corrective for his theological ethics. For instance, Aristotle's metaphysics helped him to further integrate Augustine's claims about the human body and soul. Moreover, since Augustine insisted that only Christians could be virtuous, Aquinas categorized Augustine's three theological virtues, (faith, hope, and charity), as only from God and only for Christian believers. For these virtues, only Christians could be virtuous. But Aquinas added that the cardinal virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance) could be acquired by any human being. Incorporating Aristotle into his Augustinian theology, Aquinas developed a moral theology based on these four virtues that had universal claims on all persons, not only on baptized Christians. While all human beings were called to acquire the four cardinal virtues; Christians were invited to receive, in addition, the three theological virtues.

This theology was rooted then in a natural law theory that held that all human beings had within them inclinations that needed to be rightly realized through the virtues. Not surprisingly, when Aquinas taught the moral life, he did so exclusively in the key of these virtues. Still, as important as this theology was, it remained largely academic in its influence.

(4) In 1215, as these academic, canonical and evangelical movements were underway, Pope Innocent III (1160–1216), convinced that the baptized masses were nonetheless damned, imposed on every Christian the annual obligation to confess one's sins individually to a priest and then to receive the Eucharist at Easter. The impact of this legislation was extensive.

To meet this new ministerial task, Innocent charged the newly established Dominican order to become trained as confessors and they, along with Franciscan companions, in turn, developed sophisticated *confessional manuals*, based—for the most part—on the *penitentials* and the seven deadly sins. While the earlier manuals were used to help Christians pursuing a life of religious devotion to

consider their sins in the light of their moral and spiritual growth, no such context existed for the *confessional manuals*.

These new manuals become the predominant instruments for forming clergy to help the laity adhere to moral instruction. But moral instruction solely concerned sin and evil and not the good. Thus despite the integrated theology of the scholastics, those ministering in the towns and villages were almost entirely involved in addressing matters of sin. The Christian was taught to first avoid sin and second to confess sin. The biblical call to follow in the footsteps of Christ became lost.

Similarly, with emphasis on one's own moral state, the Christian's communal self-understanding diminished and a long period of moral narcissism began, in which Christians became anxious about, not the kingdom or the needs of the church and the world, nor about the works of mercy, but rather about the state of their individual souls. Though neither Christian idealism nor innovation was particularly evident in the ordinary moral concerns of the day and though judgment day loomed not as a day of deliverance but as a day of damnation for the masses, these manuals served as important instruments of social control and stability in a period of considerable chaos and political instability.

The Reformers attacked the confessional manuals, above all because as Thomas Tentler argued, the Christian's hope for salvation became existentially and primarily dependent on a good confession and not on faith in Jesus Christ.

Besides attacking the confessional, the Reformers were also determined to replace the seven deadly sins with the Ten Commandments as the foundational category for offering moral instruction. They argued that the commandments, unlike the seven sins, enjoyed divine sanction: they could be found in Revelation. They were also a solid pedagogical tool that resisted any attempt at embellishment, while the seven sins afforded the medieval mind the opportunity to compound and expand on them. Unlike the seven deadly sins, they offered not only negative prohibitions, but in some instances, positive prescriptions. In fact, in commenting on the commandments both Martin Luther and John Calvin always taught prescriptions and prohibitions for each commandment. Finally, with the possible exception of pride, the deadly sins were offenses to humanity; the commandments, however, began with what was owed God, and then what was owed to others. This more integrated, balanced, Scripture-based ethics became foundational to Protestant moral education.

Roman Catholics, through the Council of Trent (1545–1563), appropriated the Reformers' insistence on the Ten Commandments but inserted their instruction into the context of the confessional manuals. That is, yet again, the moral agenda was not primarily to follow Christ, but to avoid sin.

Still, during this time, there were contemporary instances of Christians seeking more than the moral minimalism of avoiding and confessing sins. These were

particularly found in religious orders which promoted the inward-turning movements of gathering together for prayer and devotion and the outward neighbor-loving practices of the works of mercy. These two movements were eventually adopted by some lay associations and/or guilds. For both laity and religious, these communities embodied the basic Christian tenet to love God and neighbor.

(5) European expansionism into the Americas and Asia in the sixteenth century raised a set of urgent moral questions about what belonged to sin and what did not. Existing *confessional manuals* were unable to keep up with the concerns that arose. For instance, the teaching that maritime insurance was a form of usury and therefore always wrong needed to be re-examined particularly in light of the enormous cargoes being transported back to Europe.

At first, professors at the University of Paris were asked to determine when, if ever, maritime insurance could be differentiated from usury and rather than resorting to a deductive application of principles of usury to these cases, the professors developed a case method or high casuistry as it is called. This inductive method, which dominated moral theology until the mid-seventeenth century, used a paradigm case instead of a principle as its truth standard. The new question or case needed to be compared analogously to a legitimately accepted paradigm to determine its moral liceity. Thus, John Mair (1467–1550) answered that just as the captain of a ship guaranteed the arrival of a ship from one port to another so too under certain similar circumstances an insurer could be morally responsible for guaranteeing the worth of the ship's cargo.

Of course, some exceptional actions needed more legitimating paradigms than others. The Augustinian absolute prohibition against lying stood as an obstacle during the Wars of Religion, especially for priests and ministers seeking to minister to their congregations. Could there be legitimating circumstances in which a minister could dissemble? In this instance, the paradigm case invoked was often the narrative from Luke's Gospel (*Luke* 24: 13–35) of the risen Jesus accompanying the disciples at Emmaus. In that story, the unrecognized Jesus walked with the disciples asking questions as if he knew nothing of the troubling news concerning the death of Jesus, the missing body of Jesus, and the claims by some, that Jesus had risen from the dead. In a time of great ambiguity, certain narratives highlighted that not all rules were absolute. If Jesus could dissemble, so could others.

Casuistry was then the exploration of the significance of circumstantial differences between the authority of a paradigm case and a new unresolved case. Eventually, trained priests in religious orders and in seminaries applied the method for forming fellow priests to hear confessions. As innovative as this method was and as clever as its users were, casuistry was almost always about determining what was sinful and what, therefore, needed to be avoided.