

NOTIFICATION ON RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN MORAL THEOLOGY AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE CHURCH AND SOCIETY

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1. Happiness the ultimate end of morality, human dignity is its measure, conscience its source. Morality denotes the quality of our free actions, which make us good or bad people. It stipulates how what we do enables us to realize our dignity and achieve our ultimate end as human beings. That ultimate end is eternal happiness, personal liberation, union with God. Conscience, the voice of God echoing in the heart of each one, prompts each person at the right moment to do good and avoid evil, and so the search for the right thing to do; it also judges the quality of our actions. It is not self-sufficient, but needs help from outside, which it seeks; the moral wisdom of others and ultimately of God. Conscience appeals to our freedom, but does not compel us: we can freely act against our conscience. This is sin, which, among other things, muffles conscience, though it cannot eradicate it. Because all are wounded by sin, original and personal, neither knowledge of what is right or wrong nor the inner freedom which moral integrity confers can be achieved without personal struggle or without help from outside.
2. Morality is not simply personal. It is also communal. Human society is a spiritual reality constituted by the decisions of those who make up society. Special responsibility rests with those who represent society; i.e. the legislators, judges, and government bodies. Morality is the ultimate measure of every positive law (what gives it its binding force), the ultimate guide in its interpretation, and the ultimate safeguard against corruption in its application. Laws and customs, in turn, influence personal morality, for good or evil – good, if the laws and recognized customs are in harmony with the moral law, evil, if they are contrary to the moral law.
3. The basic principles and precepts of morality are objective, universal, and indivisible. They are to be found in all peoples at all times (cf Rom 2:14-15), though not practiced by all (Rom 1:18ff.). They are insights into the requirements of our humanity, of our conscience, which measure and guide the actions of individuals and communities. They are constant and unchanging amid the flux of history and cultures, and are handed on in various degrees by great religions and the world's sapiential traditions (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, # 94). They all apply, cannot be played off against each other, and so are indivisible. They constitute what pre-Christian philosophers called the 'natural law', namely what the reasonable, balanced human being, in any culture, across time and space would with an upright conscience judge good and right. They were definitively articulated, summarized, and clarified in the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:2-17; Deut. 5:6-21). To live in harmony with the objective moral order, the natural law, requires help from above.

Likewise, to know the full implications of the demands of that law also requires help from above, not least because of our sinful human condition.

4. Christian morality is about Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever, more precisely, it is about the complete restoration of our original, God-given dignity and its perfection in Christ. It takes up the wisdom of humanity, confirms, clarifies, and augments it. It concerns our becoming Christ-like, by following the Way that is illuminated by the Truth and leads to Life (cf. Jn 14:6). It is concerned with our ultimate happiness, Beatitude (cf. Mt 5:3-12 and par.). Jesus Christ is that help-from-above become incarnate in history. He invites all men and women to 'come, follow me'. Christian morality is not so much about rules and regulations, though it cannot function without them. In the first place, it is about the universal call to holiness, the life of virtue. Christian morality is made possible by the new life received in baptism, which life is quickened by a conscience now illuminated by the mind of Christ responding to the exigencies of everyday. It is about external and internal grace. The mind of the Christ is an external grace, which expresses the mind of Christ (cf. 1 Cor 2:16), in this case with regard to the demands of the moral law, and so, as a gift to humanity, is indispensable in the formation of conscience.

5. Sent by Christ to make disciples of all nations and teach them to obey what He had commanded (Mt 28:19-20), the Apostles and their successors, the bishops, in communion with the successor of St Peter, the Bishop of Rome, have clarified in the course of the centuries the moral demands of discipleship. Though these demands often exceed the moral demands common to all human beings, they do not abrogate them, as those universal demands constitute the foundation of all morality. As in the case of the articulation of the Church's profession of faith, there has also been a development in the moral teaching of the Church over the centuries, as the Holy Spirit leads the Church into the full truth (cf. Jn16:13). This development 'represents a constant deepening of knowledge with regard to morality' (*Veritatis Splendor*, # 4). The mind of the Church as articulated by the living Magisterium of the Church is directed to the conscience of all humanity in general and the individual consciences of all Christians in particular. It is not simply a set of rules for Catholics. What distinguishes Catholics as such is their *acceptance* of the authoritative teaching of the Church as binding in conscience, irrespective of their own subjective views on the matter. It is the obedience of faith (cf. Heb 11:1ff.) marked by humility and gratitude, expressing our trust in the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

6. While philosophical ethics is the scholarly discipline that probes the moral dimension of our humanity by means of reason only, the scholarly discipline of moral theology, taking up the insights of philosophy, judges everything in the light of revelation (cf. 2 Cor 10:5), namely Scripture and Tradition as interpreted by the divinely instituted teaching authority of the Church. Moral theology in turn is divided into fundamental moral theology, which deals with the underlying, basic principles, and special moral theology, which deals with specific areas of moral behaviour, corresponding to the Ten Commandments, our concrete duties to God and neighbour. Though usually treated separately, these two disciplines mutually condition each other.
7. Responding to the demands of the Second Vatican Council, various attempts have been made over the past decades to renew the discipline of moral theology, in particular fundamental moral theology. The renewal of moral theology was needed to overcome the excessive, not to say rigorist legalism of the dominant moral theology before the Council, with its concentration on sin. The results of the renewal are summarized in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which describes the way moral theology must be presented today as a catechesis that will uncover 'in all clarity the joy and the demands of the way of Christ'. Here the Christian moral life is viewed as a work of the Holy Spirit and of grace. It has the beatitudes as its goal, and the confession and forgiveness of sin as a means to that goal, together with the practice of the human virtues, themselves rooted in the theological virtues, which enable us to fulfil the twofold commandment of love within the ecclesial community (cf. CCC# 1697). A comprehensive summary of the Church's teaching on morality is to be found in the new *Catechism*.
8. The renewal of moral theology inevitably brought about a number of developments, which in the attempt to find a better articulation of the fundamental principles within the context of contemporary culture, can only be described as inadequate, or, indeed, erroneous, as not being in harmony with the Church's teaching or the wisdom of humanity. One such attempt to articulate a renewed fundamental moral theology is that found in the book *Does Morality Change?* By Father Séan Fagan, S.M. (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan; Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1997). The value of making such an attempt is to be recognized. However, this book contains a number of errors common to similar attempts at renewal.

9. To address these and related errors, Pope John Paul II issued the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, in which, for the first time ever, the Church's teaching authority 'has set forth in detail the fundamental elements of [the Church's moral] teaching, and presented the principles for the pastoral discernment necessary in practical and cultural situations which are complex and even crucial' (#115). This unprecedented intervention by the Magisterium was caused by the enormous divergences among moral theologians arising from the reception of *Humanae Vitae* (1968) to the extent of public dissent from that teaching. But its significance goes beyond the discipline of moral theology.
10. The most significant of the prevailing errors in moral theology are as follows:
 - a) **The denial of the binding force of the Magisterium on conscience**, whereby the faithful (which includes theologians) 'are obliged to submit to their bishops' decision made in the name of Christ, in matters of faith and morals' and that '[t]his submission of the will and intellect must be given, in a special way, to the authentic teaching authority of the Roman Pontiff, even when he does not speak *ex cathedra*...' (*Lumen Gentium*, # 25, cf. CCC ## 2032-2040). Behind this denial is the wrongful assumption that the Church's teachings are to be accepted only to the extent one can accept the *reasons* given for them, thus reducing the Church's teaching to one opinion among others, to be taken into consideration but not binding in conscience. This places one's subjective judgement above that of the Church (see 10e below).
 - b) **The uncritical acceptance of the tendency 'to substitute a dynamic and more evolutionary concept of nature for a static one'** (*Gaudium et spes*, # 5). What this involves is the failure to distinguish between 'the everlasting from the changeable' (#52) and the denial that 'beneath all the changes [in history] there is much that has its ultimate foundation in Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever (*Gaudium et spes*, # 10; *Veritatis Splendor*, # 53). And so, it is falsely asserted that human nature as such is subject to change, with the result that the traditional understanding of natural law (natural justice) is denied, and morality is said to be subject to change.
 - c) **The effective rejection of the Church's understanding of natural law (illuminated by revelation)**. The Church does not teach, as is falsely claimed, that the moral order can be discovered from the regular and uniform physical laws of nature. But the law is called natural 'not because it refers to the nature of irrational beings but because the reason which promulgates it is proper to human nature' (*VS* # 42) and because it 'expresses the dignity of the human person and lays the foundation for his fundamental rights and duties' (*VS* # 51). Christ is the full revelation of that human dignity, whose Spirit throws light on what is otherwise but dimly known by human reason (cf. Rom 2:12-29; 1 Thess 4:1-8). The

divinely instituted teaching authority of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit ensures that this light shines forth in every generation and every place, despite the distortions to which sinful humanity is prone.

- d) **The explicit denial of moral absolutes, specifically those concrete acts which are intrinsically wrong** in all situations, at all times, irrespective of the motive, foreseen good consequences, or actual circumstances of the acting person. To justify this denial, theologians have proposed a number of theories (ultimately based on a now outdated utilitarianism), which are described variously as ‘consequentialist’, ‘teleologist’, or ‘proportionalist’. Proportionalism, for example, weighs the good and bad effects of a choice, in order to determine ‘the greater good’ or ‘the lesser evil’ which can be achieved in a given situation (cf. VS, # 75). Such theories are to be rejected (cf. VS, ## 71-93). They tend to reduce morality to intention (motivation) and overturn the basic moral principle that the end can never justify the means (cf. Rom 3:8). This they do by denying the wrongness *per se* (i.e. in all circumstances, however exalted the motive or how pressing the particular situation may be) of such acts, e.g. as *in vitro fertilization*, direct abortion, homosexual acts, contraception, and direct sterilization. Many such objectively wrong actions are committed by people under duress of one kind or another or indeed in subjective ignorance about the actual wrongness of the action. In such cases, subjective guilt may be reduced, or even entirely absent. But the act is still intrinsically wrong (or evil); it prevents their full human flourishing, does not draw them closer to God, and often causes damage to other people.
- e) **The promotion of a false understanding of conscience** as though it could decide moral principles or norms, whereas it is subordinate to them, must find out what they are, and make a judgement as to when and how they apply. In a word, one’s conscience is relevant for deciding *what to do*, not what principles one lives by; *it governs acts*, not principles. The false notion of conscience amounts to a claim to be able to determine what is good and evil (cf. VS ## 35-37), namely to choose what might constitute one’s own moral principles, often falsely described as ‘moral beliefs’ or values, which may include those proposed by the Church, though not necessarily so (cf. VS, ## 54-64). The final criterion is subjective, indeed irrational: what makes one feel happy here and now.

11. The above errors, in fact, are but various manifestations of a widespread moral relativism, itself based on the denial of our capacity to know objective truth with a minimum of certainty. Such moral relativism characterizes much of contemporary culture and gives these errors their plausibility. This is the main reason for the authoritative rejection of these errors by the Church’s Magisterium (cf. VS ## 4-5; cf. #33; 84), whose teaching articulates, in season and out of season, the Truth that alone can make us free.

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