CATHOLIC MORALITY AND PROCESS MORALITY

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THE MORAL THEOLOGY of the Roman Catholic Church has changed since the Second Vatican Council. On the one hand, it has deepened its roots in the Gospels, the New Testament, the Fathers of the Church and in certain aspects of the theology of St Thomas Aquinas. On the other hand, it has been enhanced by a modern cognisance of liberal democracy, secularity, freedom of conscience, equality, diversity, and biology, sociology, psychology, ecology and science in general. Moral awareness and Catholic moral theology are not static and monolithic; they are alive, organic and interrelated.

The categories of change and experience have become very important ones in Catholic theology. The moral awareness of the Church has grown through time and history under the guiding influence of the Holy Spirit. The political thought of the Enlightenment and the continuing social experiment of democracy have shaped the moral awareness of Catholics, just as reform and recovery after the Babylonian captivity influenced that of the Israelites of the Old Testament. Our moral awareness grows as we experience the guidance of God in history. This is true, not only of the ancient Old Testament People of God, but also of today's People of God.

Consequently the Roman Catholic Church will be better served and will articulate its mission more clearly when it expresses its identity from a *process* perspective. The perennial moral vision of the Catholic Church is compatible with such a view; indeed, it has within its tradition elements of scripture and philosophy that are consistent with the process perspective and invite further explication from that point of view. Such a perspective, which takes account of change and is not menaced by its apparent vicissitudes in relation to tradition, is also a relational, personalist and interpersonal one.[1] It is based on relationship with God

[1] As I understand it, personalism grew up parallel to existentialism, which was more of an atheistic movement. Personalism was basically Catholic, and I associate it with Emmanuel Mounier, Paul Tournier,

The Way, 57/4 (October 2018), 33–44

and with our neighbours, including our enemies. It grows through history as an ever-deepening relationship with Jesus Christ. Creativity in and fidelity to this relationship is essential.

Human Nature, Commitment and Covenant

The best way to understand process morality, especially if we do so with attention to the cosmological categories of Alfred North Whitehead,[2] is as a super-relationship with God, who initiates and invites other relationships of all kinds. As Christians, we experience our relationship with God as modelled and focused upon, and mediated by, our relationship with the human Jesus. Beyond this, the relational pattern is also carried over into our relationship with the human community. Concern for our neighbours, social justice and cosmic compassion are all relational and processive. Human beings, as is discernible from the Old Testament onwards, have grown in their moral awareness and in their sense of civilised behaviour over time. Their sense of God has matured from a champion war-god who favoured only one chosen people to a loving creator of all people and a fellow-sufferer who understands them. Human moral self-awareness has grown concomitantly.

During the time when the book of Joshua was written, God's chosen people really thought that God was leading them to slay large groups of their neighbours as they swept into the Promised Land (Joshua 6:16–17). God's giving them the Promised Land meant to them that they had general licence, and indeed literal divine directives, to kill innocent people because they belonged to other tribes. In the time of the return from captivity in Babylon, Ezra felt directed by God to order all the non-Israelite wives of Jews to be divorced (Ezra 10:10–12). No Jew or Christian today, we might hope, could accept such a command as coming from the mouth of God. Times change, and what people think of as the will of God and as the word of God changes as well.

As the People of God have developed their moral awareness through history, becoming ever more discerning and continually refining their experience, they have changed their minds about what God is telling them to do. Abraham thought he was doing the will of God when he raised

Jacques Maritain and Dietrich von Hilderbrand. Pope John Paul II, also a philosopher, called himself a personalist. Personalism stressed the dignity of persons, particularly the workers and the poor in society. It also stressed political freedom and the need for all in society to work together for the common good.

[2] See Robert E. Doud, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Whitehead', *The Way*, 48/3 (July 2009), 47–60.

Joshua Commanding the Sun to Stand Still upon Gibeon, *by John Martin, 1816*

his arm, knife in hand, to slay Isaac (Genesis 22: 2–8). The angel stayed the arm, hand and will of Abraham, and thence came the understanding—a legitimate breakthrough for its time—that human sacrifice was no longer required by God, if not yet that it was rebarbative in the sight of God. The change was not in God's will; the change had come in human awareness of what is appropriate in the worship of God.

Thus human nature has changed over the centuries. And our awareness of what our own human nature is like has also changed. This changing self-awareness has in turn changed human nature itself. The process view of human nature sees it as a progressive accumulation of such changes over time. Since human beings have freedom, our choices have helped to determine what we are in the common nature that supports us as persons and as distinct communities.

Human nature is analogous to a *commitment*. A commitment is a series of choices, a cumulative process of moment-by-moment decision-making.[3] As human beings, each of us is a unique blend of self-determining decisions, progressively sedimented into our personalities over time. The notion of commitment is a metaphysical category as well as a moral category. Commitment is the metaphysical glue that holds us together as persons and binds us to other commitments, that is, to other persons.

[3] See Robert E. Doud, 'The Mystery of Commitment and the Commitment to Mystery', *The Way*, 57/2 (April 2018), 65–74.

As commitments, persons are relational and intersubjective. We are made up of the moral and metaphysical bonds we establish with our fellow human beings, and with our natural environments and societies at large. Human nature, writ large, so to speak, is analogous to the commitment that each of us is in our own metaphysical constitution.

Fidelity to commitments in a universe of radical change is the moral situation of all of us. It is not a matter of clinging to what is static or artificially permanent; it is a matter of evolving constantly in our moral and metaphysical dimensions, of actively receiving the spirit of enthusiastic renewal in the present moment. Fidelity to promises made in the past is a destructive burden if it is not also a loving and joyful assent to the work of fulfilment in the present.

The reality of *covenant* grows in this spirit of creative fidelity. In the Bible it is an experience of constant renewal: God and the prophets call the people back, again and again, to the covenant and they repent and return. Fully understood, the covenant is the reality that defines God's people and gives them their identity. The covenant is freely offered to the people out of God's beneficence, and it is freely accepted by those who understand themselves as belonging to the one God.

The theology of *continuous conversion* is consistent with the process view of ethics. As Church and as individuals, Catholics are called to continuous conversion, that is, to turning away from sin and towards God and neighbour in loving relationship. Every moment of existence contains an instigation from God and an invitation to ever-deepening relationship. Thus God creates us anew in every moment, gives us a new heart (Ezekiel 36:26), and offers us the freedom to move away from sin and negative living and towards grace and positive living. On the level of the Church, too, we are invited to move ever closer to God, and away from negative allurements and ensnarements. The tradition of the Church must also be enlightened by present experience and carried forward in this spirit of creative fidelity.

The Church and Tradition

Paul Tillich has written brilliantly about having the 'courage to be' in the moral life.[4] We need the courage really to *be* the Church, not just to bear the burden and shackles of whatever the Church was in the past. We

[4] See Paul Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1952).

need the courage to make decisions for renewal and to discard baggage that is unnecessary as we move into the future. The Holy Spirit is guiding us as a Church, but we need to find the courage to follow that guidance. Our knowledge of the prophets tells us that the Spirit does not always speak through old structures and institutions, but often through new voices and new visions as well.

Fidelity to tradition involves understanding tradition. Tradition is not the bearing forward of a complete deposit of faith as an unalterable monolith that grows in weight upon our shoulders as we go through the centuries. Tradition also consists in pruning, discarding and discerning as no longer necessary elements that may have served a purpose in the past, but now prevent us from responding to new instigations, new invitations, the new *kairos* and new opportunities for *metanoia*. Tradition is the life of the Church. It is an intricate pattern of many commitments, as Christians—Catholics and others—weave themselves into a textile of goodwill and mutual service. At length, this pattern is inextricable and indiscernible from the pattern of the life of Christ. Tradition (with a capital 'T') is also the system of beliefs and truths that are part of the constitution of the Church and are passed on through the ages with the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Church has the lasting guarantee from Christ that, with the Holy Spirit, it will never stray from the truth of this Tradition. Tradition is not static, however, but is always growing in deeper explication of what is always implicit in it. Realisations and explanations become clearer as the Church lives on in service to Christ.

Fidelity to tradition involves understanding tradition

The eucharist is the paramount example of Tradition. Eucharist involves the passing on of the Body of the Lord from generation to generation, to ever-new people, speaking ever-new languages, with preachers addressing ever-new situations. The reality of eucharist is that of passing on what we have received. Out of fidelity to what the eucharist is in a perennial way, we make alterations to its presentation in how we pass it on, in order to facilitate that very passing on, and the possibility of its taking ever deeper root in our community and history. If we filter out the reality and importance of the changes in every new phase of this process, we lose our ability to appreciate fully the realities of Tradition and eucharist. Eucharist is a process, like Tradition, conversion, personal moral growth and the Church itself.

Tradition is not to be confused with the many traditions (lower case 't') arising from various cultures, and different times and places in

the history of the Church. None of these traditions is a necessary part of the Church's constitution, but they serve to enable and enhance the sign-value of the Church as it communicates its ever accumulating and self-winnowing deposit of faith. Traditions (lower case 't') will often be pruned away in service of better expressions of Tradition in the history of the Church.

Making Mistakes

An aspect of Church teaching that inhibits our understanding of the Church in its growth and development through history is the persistent idea that the Church has never been wrong. The Church in fact has been wrong in some important ways, even if not blatantly erroneous in its moral teaching. It only very slowly came to condemn slavery and then, later on, capital punishment.[5] In more recent times Pope Paul VI condemned all warfare as morally wrong.

Fidelity requires honesty, self-assessment, recognising mistakes, and admitting them. Healthy and functional fidelity cannot be based on self-delusion and self-deception. Not being able to admit to being mistaken makes a way of life out of self-delusion and self-deception. To admit, for example, that the requirement of celibacy and complete chastity for priesthood is no longer functional or desirable would be to admit a mistake. The Church has held on to the celibacy requirement for too long, and now there is a chronic and systemic shortage of priests. Not to be able to recognise a problem is never to be able to fix the problem. The Church would rather deny itself the services of an adequate number of priests than make a change that hearkens to the new needs of a new time.

The chief problem in the Church today is one of self-awareness. The Church, in fact, is a living and organic tradition that reads the signs of the times, adapts, reassesses its priorities, discerns new directions and envisions new possibilities. The problem lies with self-awareness or self-conception. The Church, even in the postmodern world, conceives of itself as a deposit of pure, changeless doctrine and practice that remains substantially the same throughout the ages. Nothing it says about

[5] See John Francis Maxwell, *Slavery and the Catholic Church* (Chichester: Barry Rose, 1975); E. Christian Brugger, *Capital Punishment and Roman Catholic Moral Tradition*, 2nd edn (Notre Dame: U. of Notre Dame P, 2014).

itself in the present is allowed to contradict or contravene what it has said about itself in the past. In practice the Church changes, but in theory and its self-awareness, the Church does not change.

This climate of misoneism is based on fear. Courage is the virtue that makes us face our fears and so courage, along with honesty, is what the Church needs. There is a fear that something essential will be lost if changes are made. Rather than gain the benefit offered by the possibility of change, the Church will do without that benefit rather than lose something—even if it is not always sure what the something actually is—that is essential. Trust in the Holy Spirit might rather say that, if we temporarily discard something essential, eventually we will realise our mistake and go back to it again. Fear of making a mistake paralyzes the Church, and so it has never developed a theory or theology that allows it—always a human institution as well as a divine one—to admit that it has done so.

There is no tradition without interpretation. There is no preservation of truth without transformation of truth. With great concern for continuity and consistency, truth grows in our judgments, applications and adjustments. At one time and in a certain context, it might have been correct to say 'outside the Church there is no salvation'. But it would be a mistake not to alter or reinterpret this doctrine, or even to cancel it out altogether, in a later time as it becomes obvious that God's grace works through other religions, be they Judaism, Buddhism, Islam or denominations of Protestantism. It is arrogant, uncharitable and incorrect to say in today's context that 'outside the Church there is no salvation'.

Moral awareness grows through experience. In the 1950s, I dare say most Catholics in the United States felt there was something wrong with being Protestant. To be Protestant was to suffer from an aberration in religious perception and perhaps in morals as well. Certainly, any Protestant who voiced a criticism of Catholics was viewed as doing something very bad. The sins of the great reformers of the sixteenth century were visited upon modern Protestants, as persisting in errors that would very likely cost them their salvation. We were to pray for Protestants, but not with them in their churches and assemblies.

By the 1960s all that had changed. The bulk of the Catholic population had a new acceptance of their Protestant neighbours and co-workers. Friendships and honest discussions between Protestants and Catholics were frequent. Catholics respected the piety of Protestants, envied their knowledge of the Bible and were far less disturbed than before about

intermarriage between Protestants and Catholics. Catholics attended Protestant weddings and funerals, and, following Vatican II, invitations went back and forth between congregations. This was not the result of a pernicious relativism or lax indifferentism; it showed respect for the consciences of other Christians. Catholics also understood that others saw the Catholic faith as in some ways too restrictive in the present, as having been corrupt in former time, and perhaps as destined to become more like Protestantism in the future. Indeed, many Catholics felt the same way about Catholicism as their Protestant friends did.

Is this a corrupting form of relativism, or is it a sign of the times, when we are invited by God to see others and ourselves within a wider frame of reference? The Holy Spirit is inviting us to trust in the experience of goodness and holiness as we experience it in others—not only Protestants, but Jews, Buddhists, Muslims, atheists and all people of good will. Most Catholics would by now agree that the grace of God does not work exclusively through the Roman Catholic Church. For most it is not the tragedy that it used to seem when someone leaves the Catholic Church and joins another, or when a Catholic marries a non-Catholic. We do not feel that if our missionaries fail to baptize non-Christians, that those people will go to hell.

We are not afraid of relativism because we are confident that human relationships are vehicles of divine grace, and that when and where we enter into relationships of friendship and commitment, God is there in the midst of them. The Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on grace, but we have the task of recognising and fostering relational graces wherever we see and experience them in human living. Authentic existence has replaced formulaic sanctity as a goal for living as a Catholic. Catholicism has at last come into its own precisely as *catholic*—as universal—as living in respect of all that is good and holy in humanity as such. We no longer have to feel, quite defensively, that we are better than everybody else.

Authority, Sin and Conscience

In the Roman Catholic Church, there will always be a tension—a necessary and irresolvable tension—between the rules to be kept and our relationship with the Christ who loves sinners. Christ is both judge of hearts and forgiver of sins. But Catholic morality transcends a casuistical or minimalist moral code and calls us to the Beatitudes and beyond. The

importance of moral growth, continuous conversion and an ever-increasing love of God and neighbour are the criteria of Christian morality. Still, where particular moral directives and infractions of the law are concerned, there is a gnawing need among the faithful to know what is right and what is wrong.

A fair characterization of Catholic moral theology from the Council of Trent to the Second Vatican Council would be that of a code of rules that could be applied by priests in judging penitents in the confessional. Such judgment seldom included an actual assessment of how the individual soul stood in relationship to God. Indeed, the God of the confessional was widely conceived of as a strict Jehovah whose demand of justice had to be appeased on every count of sin.

But it is important to understand that it is not rules or commandments that are at the heart of our morality. The ultimate law by which we live is the law of Christ. The phrase 'law of Christ' itself is a paradox. In New Testament Christianity, the person of Jesus Christ replaces the Torah or law of God of the Old Testament. The centre of our morality is not a code or set of rules, even though the biblical rules are still important to us. At the centre is a person—Jesus Christ—who is both divine and human. The humanity of Christ is the supreme sacrament that makes present the divinity of God. His person and his two natures are the basis of Catholic spirituality and morality.

Christ and the Adulteress, ***by Alessandro Varotari, early seventeenth century***

The moral rules and stipulations, all based in the Bible, flow together to shape and give articulation to the relationships we have with Christ and with one another. The relationships themselves are more important than the rules that shape and guide them. Infractions of the rules are sins, but sin is to be understood in a relational context. Sin is not only the transgression of a law; it is the breaking or straining of the covenant, which is that super-relationship between God, each person and all other people.

The reason that most Catholics go to confession less frequently since the Second Vatican Council is therefore not necessarily one of moral laxity. What appears to many 'traditional' Catholics to be moral laxity on the part of Vatican II Catholics may rather be a more comfortable relationship with God resulting from a processive and personalist moral vision. It is also to be noticed that sensitivity to human relationships, valuing the poor and concern for social justice issues have increased among Catholics since Vatican II. We have become a kinder, gentler, more inclusive people than we were before.

The Catholic vision of reality is christological, incarnational and universal in scope. It is also biblical, traditional and papal. The contemporary Catholic is at times embarrassed by the papal aspect of Catholic identity. It often seems that this coincides with a non-processive view in which stipulations are handed down and directives in faith and morals are made from above for all Catholics to follow. The Pope and the Vatican seem to be the institutions that hold the Church back from making progress in some areas. The Church is always discerning the difference between making progress and maintaining unity.

The Catholic Church believes that the Holy Spirit speaks and inspires in the Church at all levels, and that God can speak to the Church as well from places that are not officially part of the Church. Even so, there are certain matters in which it is necessary to have a single voice, and that single voice is the papacy or Petrine office, as based in the Catholic understanding of the New Testament. Even if a Catholic dissents from a moral teaching of the Church, he or she gives serious religious regard to that teaching and to its source.

But the last court of appeal for the Catholic is his or her conscience. There is an obligation to inform that conscience as well as possible, but the ultimate judgment about the rightness or wrongness of an action belongs to the individual conscience itself. This is why, for example, a

Catholic in a secular democracy may be in favour of laws that allow abortion. Abortion is wrong according to Catholic teaching, but it is also wrong for Catholics to think that they can or must legislate away the decision-making right of many who are not Catholics. There are differences between embryos, foetuses and babies, and reasonable people can differ in their opinions about the morality of abortion.

The Catholic conscience operates in a space where it balances authority and tradition with freedom and novelty. Novelty and complexity are part of all moral decisions. The moral situation is always one that has never occurred before in exactly the same way, and there are multiple factors of moral importance in it that need to be weighed and taken into account. Morality is seldom a matter of just obeying a rule. Decisions must be made in such a way as to respect rules, even if not always literally to keep them. The authority of the Church is subordinate to our discipleship of Christ, which is a loving-learning relationship of fidelity.

The Vision of Accepting God's Vision

Moral process welcomes change rather than being afraid of it and values experience even when that experience and the learning it brings threaten our need for control and our need never to be wrong about anything. Experience is experimental and yet, well and trustingly discerned, it reveals the direction in which God's Spirit leads us. In the process view, there is no life and no action that does not grow out of the rich fund of well-discerned experience. Theology is based on tradition, which is the growth of the Church through time and history. The moral awareness of the Church and the sense of its own identity have developed historically. Process takes account of the progressive, at times perhaps recessive, and always historical emergence of the Church, an institution that is frail and human as well as glorious and divine. Our own lives and our own growing awareness of self mirror the growth of the Church, including change and development in the moral teaching of the Church.

By now we have built up a moral vision for Catholicism. The present-day self-understanding of the Catholic is inclusive of all our fellow human beings. No individual or group is thought of as evil or marked for exclusion and avoidance. The grace of God brings the best out of everybody. Catholicism humbly accepts the reality that its structures,