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Four Challenges for Moral Theology in the New Century

Life, that dares send
A challenge to his end,
And when it comes say,
“Welcome friend.”

RICHARD CRASHAW

“WISHES TO HIS (SUPPOSED) MISTRESS”

1. Four Challenges to Befriend

THE ENGLISH METAPHYSICAL POET, Richard Crashaw, in his poem, “Wishes to His (Supposed) Mistress,” encourages his mistress to regard the challenges of life as friends. The use of the term “friend” is suggestive. A core feature of the classical conception of friendship is that friends reveal their secrets to each other. Perhaps, therefore, the poet is suggesting that challenges can be revelatory, that they have something to teach us once we face them. If this, at least in part, is what the poet means to tell us, then we who aspire to have theology as our mistress would do well to follow the poet’s example and encourage our mistress to make friends with her challenges—to encourage moral theology to confront squarely the challenges that

are before us, so that these challenges can surrender their secrets concerning the moral life and the Christian vocation.

There are, it seems to me, four challenges—or at least four classes of challenges—which stand out as we begin this new century. First, there is the challenge to understand our history. The term “moral theology” with its current meaning dates to the seventeenth century, which means that moral theology as a distinct discipline is a child of the Baroque. To understand moral theology today, therefore, we need to understand the salient features of Baroque theology and how they continue to influence us in our approach to theology.

The second challenge is the challenge of nature. The twentieth century saw the advent of theories and experiments in science that have profoundly called into question the Enlightenment rationalism (with its deterministic and mechanistic conceptions of nature) that underlies the ideal of science embraced by many of its practitioners. Besides casting scientists into a troubled time of self-questioning, this development has also placed modern moral philosophy in a new light. Many of the assumptions of modern philosophy (from Hume to Kant and all the way to the present) are predicated on the mechanistic determinism of the Enlightenment. Yet, if this Enlightenment view of nature has been seriously questioned by scientists themselves, what significance does this have for the moral theories predicated on this outmoded view of nature? If the revolutions in science during the twentieth century have indeed shown that the Enlightenment view of nature is outmoded, then moral theology is faced with a challenge to revisit its understanding of nature. Specifically, what is the relationship between human nature and the moral good? The most effective way to meet this challenge, I would like to suggest, is by resurrecting a venerable discipline, the philosophy of nature, and by drawing from it a renewed philosophical anthropology. This will enable us to go beyond debates about rules and consequences, to the question of human fulfillment, which alone gives rules and consequences their meaning.

Third, if grace is the effect of God's love on human nature, then a renewed understanding of nature will invite a renewed conception of grace. Such a renewal could go in several directions, but one important area is the challenge to renew our understanding of moral development in Christ. Concretely, what is the character of our relationship with Christ and with one another in Christ? The response to this challenge requires that we develop a renewed understanding of the role of faith in moral development.

Lastly, as we begin this new century, there is a challenge specifically addressed to moral theologians themselves. It is the challenge to develop a spirituality proper to our trade, the spirituality of the moral theologian. What type of person must I be to be a teacher of moral theology in the name of the Gospel and of the Church? This question, it seems to me, can only be answered by turning our attention to the role of the Holy Spirit in our work and our call to trust in him.

Many other particular problems confront us: stem cell research, euthanasia, abortion, the just distribution of resources—the list goes on and on. Yet we will only be able to confront these particular problems if we place them within the context of the more general challenges mentioned above. Those four challenges, it seems to me, are the primary challenges we must befriend as we begin this new century, challenges that—if the poet is right—will, when confronted, surrender the secrets they contain about the moral life. Such a befriending, however, is the task of a lifetime, the task of many lives working together. Thus, in this essay we can do little more than suggest briefly how this befriending can occur. We shall endeavor to become better acquainted with these challenges and several possible responses to them.

2. The Challenge of History

We begin with the challenge of our history, the challenge of the origins and structure of moral theology as a distinct discipline. The first

work structured according to what was to become the classical perspective of the manuals of moral theology was the *Institutiones Morales* of the Jesuit Juan Azor, which appeared in the first years of the seventeenth century. Fr. Servais Pinckaers has masterfully shown how Azor's approach to moral theology differs from the earlier approaches expressed in the works of the Fathers of the Church and of St. Thomas Aquinas. Pinckaers demonstrates that when we compare the two perspectives, three features stand out immediately.¹ First, the manuals analyze the moral life in isolation from the study of grace and the great truths of the faith, which are now treated in dogmatic theology, as well as in isolation from aspects of the Christian response to grace and one's growth in it, which now belong to the domains of mystical and ascetical theology. Second, instead of beginning their analysis with the question of happiness or human beatitude, the manuals begin with the study of individual human acts. Lastly, instead of focusing on the virtues that dispose us to live in harmony with our vocation to beatitude, the manuals focus on law and on how to apply the law in individual cases through the forum of conscience. The shortcomings of this perspective have been ably and rightly studied by Fr. Pinckaers and others. A further task, however, still remains—a task that requires what one could call “imaginative empathy,” whereby we enter into the perspective of the manuals in order to understand them and transcend them. Indeed, a case could be made that we will not be able to exorcise the ghost of the manuals until we fully recognize and respect the constructive animus that underlay their perspective.

A full account of the history of the moral manuals would include a detailed study of the nominalism and voluntarism of the late Middle Ages and the direction these perspectives took in the Reformation, the Renaissance, and the early Baroque periods. Here, however, I wish only to suggest an analogy as an aid to understanding the role of the manuals, and of Baroque theology generally, in the history of the Church. It is an analogy suggested by the piety of St. Ignatius of

Loyola, the saint whose disciples played a key role in developing Baroque theology and the perspective of the moral manuals. The chroniclers tell us that one of Ignatius's favorite prayers was the *Alma Christi*, a prayer that alludes to the role of Christ's passion as a healing salve.² This Ignatian piety is apt, for in many respects the Jesuits functioned in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as the medical corps of Christ. They dedicated themselves to the care of souls (*cura animarum*) and undertook to bandage the wounds of the Church. There were many wounds to bandage. This suggests that a fruitful way to regard the manuals of moral theology is by analogy with a bandage.

The manuals were part of a comprehensive cultural bandage applied by the Church on her own wounds during the era of the Baroque. Nominalism (which asserted the radical individuality of all things, denying the existence of essences in which classes of things participate) and voluntarism (which portrayed freedom as the exclusive activity of a will radically independent from nature, the intellect, or human inclinations, and which is constrained only by the power of a stronger will expressed in law): these two perspectives had deep and lasting effects upon the Church. As filtered through the Reformation and early Enlightenment, they ripped deep wounds into the heart of the Church.

Each element of the manualist perspective can be viewed as part of the Baroque bandage that stopped the hemorrhaging caused by the wounds suffered in the Church. If hemorrhaging here signifies the spiritual and intellectual errors into which many of the faithful were spilling, then the perspective of the Baroque functioned as a compress that stopped the Church's spiritual hemorrhaging. The role of grace and the spiritual life of the Christian—the human person's participation in the life of the Trinity—had become sources of great confusion during this period. Many of the faithful were spilling out into strange doctrines and practices with regard to them. One way to contain this spillage was by separating the study of these "troubled"

subjects from the study of morals. The clergy could safely teach the faithful the principles of the moral life, now regarded primarily as rules to follow. They could then later teach the more gifted and discerning among the faithful about grace, beatitude, and life in the Spirit. In other words, moral theology as the domain of rules becomes something clerics teach to all the faithful, while dogmatic theology, ascetical theology, and mystical theology become the reserve of a chosen few.

It is precisely here that the analogy of the compression bandage attains its cogency. Just as a compress stops the bleeding, but does not heal the wound, so too the theology of the Baroque period kept the faithful from spilling into the errors of the day, but it did not heal the wounds caused by nominalism, voluntarism, and the rationalism of the early Enlightenment. For this reason, just as a bandage must be removed before the wound can fully heal, so too the perspective of the manuals had to be set aside before the wounds in moral theology could be healed.³ Within this analogy we can regard the Holy Spirit as acting at the Second Vatican Council as the good physician. In essence, the Spirit at the Council inspired the council fathers to remove the bandage of the Baroque. The removal caused pain and some bleeding. It seemed at times as if the wound were being reopened. Yet, the removal was necessary so that what was rent asunder by nominalism and voluntarism could finally be healed, healed by drawing moral theology back into its original unity with the rest of theology. This analogy also points to the contemporary task of the moral theologian. If the Second Vatican Council removed the bandage, then one of the primary tasks of moral theology in this new century is to reintegrate moral theology back into the whole of theology. The task is to develop a moral theology that once again focuses on the human person's vocation to happiness in the life of grace attained through the action of the Spirit and our cooperation with it. The bandage was good; it was life saving and brought new vitality to the Church. Yet, the time had come, and has come, to

remove the bandage and to heal the wound. The time has come to recover and develop the perspective of the early Church.

3. *The Challenge of Nature*

The first and most basic challenge we must confront in our effort to recover the holistic perspective of the early Church is the challenge of the natural world. Precisely at the historic moment when moral theology was emerging as a distinct discipline, the working relationship that had existed between theology and the natural sciences began to disintegrate. As the result of a complex convergence of factors, natural science began to chart its own course and develop its own methods in increasing isolation from scholastic philosophy and theology. The consequences of this separation were profound. Two of them were of particular import for moral theology: the exalted ideal of reason and the mechanistic conception of the physical world developed by the philosophical fathers of modern science. A fuller treatment of this history would offer an extended study of these two developments. In this brief essay, however, we can do no more than name their effects: the apparent power of the Enlightenment ideal of reason led moral philosophers to embrace a mathematical model of practical reasoning that reduced practical reason to a type of instrumental reasoning. *Phronesis* became *techne*; *prudentia* became *ars*.

Second, the mechanistic conception of nature led moral philosophers to regard the physical world as belonging to the domain of necessity, where every action was predetermined according to the mechanistic laws of nature. These two developments set the agenda for moral philosophy. It caused moral philosophers to search for a way to explain freedom and responsibility. If the physical world is the realm of necessity, whence freedom and therefore also whence moral action worthy of praise or blame? Modern moral philosophers of different stripes and flavors offer the same general answer to this question: Freedom resides in the will.

From this modern perspective, freedom is no longer the product of intellect and will working together (what the medievals called *liberum arbitrium*: free decision). It is no longer rooted in the inclinations of nature as the achievement of my growth in virtue. Instead, freedom is the radical power of my will to act independently of the inclinations of nature and the dictates of reason. The English philosopher Stuart Hampshire speaks for this whole tradition when he says, "I identify myself with my will."⁴ The moral agent is no longer a rational animal, embedded in a community where he learns the virtues that enable him to attain rightly ordered affections and to live according to practical wisdom, all of which empower him to have the freedom to live in harmony with the deepest inclinations of nature. No, now the agent is a radically independent and free will that can act independently from nature, inclination, and reason, all of which belong to the realm of natural determinism and instrumental reasoning.

This modern view of nature and of freedom continues to shape Catholic moral theology today. Indeed, the theories of Proportionalists such as Josef Fuchs and of Deontologists such as Germain Grisez both presuppose an Enlightenment perspective on the physical world and on human agency in it. The physical world is the domain of instrumental reason, while freedom and moral worth are the product of some form of properly motivated "good will." For both groups, the physical is the realm of quantities not qualities. Consequently, they both accept Hume's anthem that you cannot attain an "ought" from an "is." Hence, both groups regard the physical as the domain of pre-moral or basic goods. Although they differ concerning how to determine the moral character of our actions, both groups agree that this determination is the result of our voluntary orientation toward the physical world regarded as the domain of these pre-moral or basic goods. In short, both groups embrace an essentially modern conception of the physical world.⁵

This shared denial of qualitative aspects of the natural world becomes paradoxical once we discover that a growing number of scientists regard the Enlightenment conception of nature as inadequate. For example, in an extraordinary study entitled *The Third Culture*, John Brockman brings together a number of top Anglo-American scientists, each of whom asserts in his own way the need to recognize that the natural world is not merely the realm of quantifiable quantities, but also of discernable qualities. Consequently, scientists need once again to become philosophers as well as scientists. They need once again to concern themselves with the philosophy of nature and to develop what Paul Davies describes as a “synthetic or holistic way of looking at the world.”⁶ Thus, for example, theoretical physicist Lee Smolin sees himself and his sympathetic fellow scientists as involved in the “rebirth of the tradition of natural philosophy,” but a natural philosophy that is now based on a “new picture of the world—a picture different from the one that the original, seventeenth-century natural philosophers shared.”⁷ Smolin singles out what he regards as the central difference: while the seventeenth-century philosophers have a static and eternal conception of the world, contemporary thinkers offer a dynamic portrait of a world that evolves over time. While Smolin’s perspective has its own limitations, his work and the work of the other contributors to Brockman’s volume reveal that a growing number of scientists are discarding the determinism of the Enlightenment and developing a more fluid conception of nature, one that remains open to a dynamic interaction between matter and spirit, between freedom and nature.

This development among scientists themselves not only invites a new dialogue between theology and science, it also calls for a new focus in moral theology. A growing number of moral philosophers, such as Alasdair MacIntyre or Julia Annas, have drawn attention once again to the virtues. They emphasize that the human person is embedded in nature and in a particular culture. Far from implying a

lack of freedom and moral integrity, our embeddedness in nature and culture is what makes freedom and moral action possible. It is in and through human nature and from within a particular community and culture that we learn to be free and to acquire a universal concern for others. The challenge for moral theology is to learn from these contemporary philosophers and with them to develop a new philosophy of nature and a new philosophical anthropology that can serve as a foundation for our theological reflections on the effect of God's love on human nature. This brings us to the third challenge: the challenge of grace.

4. The Challenge of Grace

Perhaps the most important challenge we face is the challenge to renew our understanding of the human person's growth in relationship with Christ. In the space that remains I can do no more than suggest the direction this renewal should take. I would like to argue that to renew our understanding of moral development we must develop a renewed understanding of the role of faith in learning. This role was known to Aristotle, who affirms that "the learner must believe." St. Thomas appropriates this insight and asserts it as a universal principle. He explains that to learn from another, we must first believe that the other is trustworthy and knowledgeable in the subject at hand. Thus, in his *Conferences on the Creed*, he states:

If a person were willing to believe only those things that he could know with assurance, he would not be able to live in this world. How would anyone be able to live unless he believed someone? How would he even know who his own father was? One must, therefore, believe someone about those things that he cannot know perfectly by himself.⁸

Aquinas offers a similar argument in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*.

No one can arrive at any wisdom except by faith. Hence it is that in the sciences, no one acquires wisdom unless he first believes what is said by his teacher. Therefore, if we wish to acquire this life of wisdom, we must believe through faith the things proposed to us by it. “He who comes to God must believe that he exists and rewards those who seek him” (Heb. 11:6); or as we read in another verse of Isaiah, “if you do not believe, you will not understand” (Isa. 28:16).⁹

St. Thomas sees this as equally true in the Christian life. To understand the core Christian mysteries, we begin by believing them in the gift of faith, a belief that entails loving trust in the one who speaks these truths to us. If we persevere in this trust, the knowledge of faith will lead to the vision of glory in heaven.¹⁰ Importantly, St. Thomas recognizes that like all students, the disciples’ understanding is partial in the beginning, but grows over time.¹¹ Like students everywhere, an apprentice in the Christian life must first trust his teacher, trust that his master knows the way of holiness and union with God, and desires to share that knowledge with us. Beginning with this trust the student is able gradually to grow in wisdom and knowledge.

One implication of the role of faith in the moral life emerges when we consider the character of the infused moral virtues. St. Thomas asserts that besides the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, Christians at their baptism are given certain infused capacities that dispose them to act according to their supernatural destiny.¹² Yet, these infused cardinal virtues are not like the acquired virtues. Although they empower us to judge rightly and do the right thing, they do not enable us to know and do this with ease, promptness, and joy. Moreover, they can coexist with acquired vices, inclinations toward vice acquired before our conversion.¹³ In other words, although the infused cardinal virtues give us the ability to know and do what is right, we often (on the psychological level) retain a deep orientation toward sin: we retain a prompt and easy

inclination to sin with real pleasure. Only after living according to the infused moral virtues, which in turn generates within us acquired dispositions in support of this action, will we do these acts with a certain ease and joy. This is where the centrality of faith emerges. Before we acquire an ordered psychology that allows us to feel the truth of Gospel morality, we must first begin by trusting that Gospel morality is true. This faith is twofold: we must trust that God really knows what will lead us to our deepest happiness (because at present sin still subjectively feels like it leads to happiness) and we must trust that the Lord gives us the ability here and now to do the right thing. For those who hear confessions or engage in spiritual direction, this insight into the role of trust has great power to reorient a person's life, especially the life of one who habitually struggles with the same failings. Indeed, there are affinities here with the insights of twelve-step programs. To overcome an addiction, one must trust in a higher power: trust that God gives us the strength right now not to engage in an addiction.

5. The Challenge of Spirituality

There is much one could say about the vocation of the moral theologian and the spirituality this vocation requires. Here, however, I wish to conclude by underscoring how the universal role played by faith in the moral life acquires unique importance in the vocation of the moral theologian. The theologian must first and foremost trust that the insights he or she acquires are from the Holy Spirit. As a consequence, the theologian need never fear the interest or interventions of the magisterium concerning his or her own work. Although the magisterium is staffed by people with very human failings, it is also the chosen instrument of the Holy Spirit. Thus, if the Spirit allows me to have some insight into the moral implications of the faith, the Spirit will eventually also let the magisterium accept this insight. The Church's first reaction, however, may be negative. The

Church may ask the moralist to state his views more clearly. She may even ask him to stop publishing on a given topic or to stop publishing all together. The joy of the theologian through all of this is his faith in the Holy Spirit. The theologian is invited to make the words of Yves Congar his own: “I believe in the Holy Spirit.” Then, as was the case for Congar and many others whose insights bore fruit at the Second Vatican Council, the vicissitudes of magisterial scrutiny—and dare I say, of Roman intrigue—will only lead the theologian to trust the Lord and his Church ever more deeply. The theologian’s obedience to the magisterium, offered from within loving trust in the Holy Spirit, will enable the theologian *in illo tempore* to sing the glories of God’s providential care.

These then, are the challenges that we must befriend: the challenge of history, the challenge of nature, the challenge of graced moral development, and the challenge of the spiritual life. If we befriend these challenges by confronting them with persistence, then perhaps the poet’s insight will be true in us: perhaps our challenges will surrender to us untold insights into the Christian life.

Notes

1. Servais Pinckaers, *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 254–79; 327–78.
2. I would like to thank James Marshall, S.J., for pointing this out to me.
3. The analogy of the compression bandage was developed in conversation with William Madden, M.D., from the University of Arizona Medical School. Dr. Madden notes that timing is crucial in the removal of compression bandages. If the compress is removed too soon, the wound reopens and the patient bleeds to death; yet, if it stays on too long, the wound can become infected and the patient dies of sepsis—blood poisoning.
4. Stuart Hampshire, *Thought and Action* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1959), 153. For a concise string of quotations from others who hold similar views of the will, see Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind: Volume II: Willing* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1978), 19–23.
5. This opens an enormous topic: in critiquing the denial that “ought” is derivable from “is,” I am not suggesting here that morality is merely the result of speculative reflection on human nature. I am suggesting, however, that the principles of practical rea-

son attain their specific content from our understanding of human nature attained in and through a community of discourse. Thus, not only do we derive concrete “oughts” from “is,” but our understanding of “is” (of what things are, including ourselves) implies a grasp of “ought,” of what we ought to be.

6. Paul Davies, “The Synthetic Path,” in *The Third Culture*, by John Brockman (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995), 309.
7. Lee Smolin, “Introduction,” in Brockman, *The Third Culture*, 30.
8. *Collationes Credo in Deum* 1.
9. *Super Ioan.* 5, *lect.* 4, no. 771.
10. *Summa theologiae (ST)* II-II q. 2, a. 3.
11. *ST* II-II q. 1, a. 7, ad 2.
12. *ST* I-II q. 63, a. 3.
13. *ST* I-II q. 65, a. 3, ad 2 and ad 3.