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In Stealing Home, Sebastian MacDonald, C.P., invites readers to explore moral agency with an eye toward the eschatology of the human experience. In this exploration, he guides readers along a continuum of factors at play in the moral decision-making process. He begins with internal processes, such as perspective and inclination, and leads into external ones, such as experience, particularly in relation to the church and to culture.

As MacDonald indicates in the introduction, this text is a generalist text, emphasizing the whole person striving for moral grounding. As such, it does not focus on particular moral issues but instead provides an overview of factors shaping moral choice.

These factors include perspective and inclination as innate but malleable dimensions at play in moral choices. In the initial chapters, he distinguishes perspective as “the horizon enveloping the world we inhabit” (9) and inclination as how we position ourselves toward our experiences, whether we process experience like Mary, an introvert, or Martha, her extroverted sister (Jn 11-12). Perspective and inclination are “premoral” influences that are “suggestive but not predictive of an agent’s moral status” (18).

However, together they influence the external factor of experience, which is at “the heart of morality” (20). He supports this claim by dedicating three chapters to it, addressing experience generally, personally, and negatively. MacDonald highlights how negative experiences, through appreciative inquiry, provide opportunities for transformation and conversion.

Conscience, as active judgment, serves as the bridge between these internal and external dimensions of moral agency on this continuum. MacDonald contends, “Unlike perspective, which is a viewpoint, or inclination, which is a tendency, conscience is a judgment that either clearly supports a course of action, or warns against it” (50). Experiences of church and culture shape conscience just as they shape perspective or inclination.

Ultimately, for MacDonald, compassion is the primary virtue for judgments of conscience that lead to moral action. He asserts that compassion is the criterion upon which the Christian will be judged. As the cornerstone for moral choice, compassion is a “significant achievement on the part of a person” because through it one becomes more fully human. MacDonald deftly distinguishes compassion from its cousins, sympathy and empathy, by highlighting the mutuality and relationality of compassion as suffering with another, whereas sympathy and empathy are one-way expressions from one to another (68).

The book concludes with a discussion of the end of things, the Kingdom of God. The driving focus of the work, this notion of eschatology is what needs to inform all moral decision-making according to MacDonald’s framework. It
is the ending of life, and foresight of this, that should shape Christian morality. He closes the work by reminding readers to “take our cue in this from the thief whom Jesus addressed on the cross, since it was only at the end that he underwent the conversion that made him the person he finally became (Lk 23:39-43). We could never say we knew the man, if we missed his final moment on earth” (77). MacDonald calls us to a mindfulness of action rooted in compassion through each moment of our lives.

The chapter on compassion is perhaps the strongest in the text due to its articulation of the virtue’s mutuality. Another of the strengths of Stealing Home is MacDonald’s clear, concise, and integrative writing style. He leads gently, illuminating his points with examples and metaphors from daily life. However, he does not develop the metaphor between playing baseball and enacting moral agency that, based on the title, we assume he will. He only implies that home plate lures the base runner in baseball like the promise of the Kingdom of God lures Christians into lives of moral action. The eschatology of the kingdom parallels the eschatology of home plate.

Unlike this implied metaphor, MacDonald clearly explicates the concepts with which he is working, linking them by providing supporting examples from often competing perspectives. Such a writing style benefits the reader by exploring the complexities of moral choice, allowing the text to be a starting point for dialogue for parish reading groups or undergraduate students.

However, MacDonald repeatedly falls back on faith and the mystery of God as almost a naïve response to life’s most difficult moral challenges. The text is rooted in the assumption that the reader holds the same level and type of faith in God, divine providence, and the church that MacDonald holds. For readers searching for support of a stalwart faith, MacDonald provides; for readers questioning the foundations of faith, MacDonald does not. Unlike the chapter on compassion, which refines an understanding of the virtue, the chapters on the church and on culture read more as assertion and justification. As an illustration of this, in regard to the church, MacDonald asserts that loyal Catholics “are responsive to the church’s competence and experience” in socially conservative issues such as abortion, homosexuality, and contraception but frequently balk at church teaching on socially progressive issues such as health care, the death penalty, or a living wage. This assumes a questionable definition of a loyal Catholic. For example, a recent Gallup poll revealed that eighty-two percent of US Catholics found birth control morally acceptable.1 Are these all disloyal Catholics because they are not receptive to this particular church teaching? Are loyal Catholics defined only as those who are socially conservative? The text on the back cover of the book states that early in his career, MacDonald was concerned that he was teaching about issues, such as sexuality and marriage, in which he had no personal experience. As a result, he shifted his focus to the basic foundations of moral theology, in which he did have experience. Then why wouldn’t he expect the church to be as brave as he himself was and come to similar realizations?

This unsettling chapter on the church is followed by the one on culture. In it, MacDonald states that culture is at its best when representing “a blend of experiences contributing to the improvement of the human person” (43). As part of these experiences, MacDonald considers the role of beauty, along with the true and the good, as contributing to human flourishing. Unfortunately, this segues into a justification of Vatican preservation of beauty in its vast collections and museums, leaving the chapter reading almost as apologetic.

Overall, Stealing Home offers a clear approach to a consideration of the moral enterprise but does so by making assumptions of faith in God and the church that leave this reviewer a bit uncomfortable.