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Living and Teaching the Moral Life as a Call to Communion

Robert Bolt's play, *A Man for All Seasons*, recounts the story of St. Thomas More, in particular his courageous stance before Henry VIII, choosing death rather than accepting Henry's marriage to Anne Boleyn and subsequently recognizing Henry as head of the church. More is often held up as a classic example of one who would adhere to his own judgment of conscience despite the pleadings of friends and loved ones to change his mind. In a scene with his friend, the Duke of Norfolk, More is encouraged to let go of his stubbornness and "give in." He replies:

More: I can't give in, Howard. (A smile) You might as well advise a man to change the color of his eyes. I can't. Our friendship's more mutable than that.

Norfolk: Oh, that's immutable, is it? The one fixed point in a world of changing friendships is that Thomas More will not give in!

More (Urgent to explain): To me it has to be, for that's myself! Affection goes as deep in me as you think, but only God is love right through, Howard; and that's myself (Bolt, 1960: 70).

Later when More's own daughter encourages him to simply say, with mental reservations, the words of the oath in support of Henry's marriage, More replies:

More: When a man takes an oath, Meg, he's holding his own self in his own hands. Like water. (He cups his hands) And if he opens his fingers then he needn't hope to find himself again. Some men aren't capable of this, but I'd be loathe to think your father one of them (Bolt, 1960: 81).

Bolt sums up More's character in the preface to the play.

Bolt: Thomas More, as I wrote about him, became for me a man with an adamant sense of his own self. He knew where he began and left off, what area of himself he could yield to the encroachments of his enemies, and what to the encroachments of those he loved. It was a substantial area in both cases, for he had a proper sense of fear and was a busy lover. Since he was a clever man and a great lawyer he was able to retire from those areas in wonderfully good order, but at length he was asked to retreat from

that final area where he located his self. And there this supple, humorous, unassuming and sophisticated person set like metal, was overtaken by an absolutely primitive rigor, and could no more be budged than a cliff (Bolt, 1960: xi).

When we reflect on More's decision and the consequences of it, we might tend to focus on his courage in refusing to take the oath. Knowing that he faced death, he "could no more be budged than a cliff." I would like to call attention, however, to the dynamics of the decision, the human struggle for integrity that Bolt displays so poignantly in his drama. Indeed taking an oath falsely is wrong. Supporting an illicit marriage is wrong. However, Bolt has captured even in these brief scenes the multiple dimensions in More's decision, something which is instructive for us as we reflect on moral theology and its role in promoting the authentic human good of persons, particularly the call to communion.

More's decision indicates a clear sense of who he is and the effect that a wrong action would have on him, both in this life and eternally. More knows what is congruent with his identity, and what actions are appropriate or inappropriate. Perhaps we could address the dimensions of his decision in terms of identity, vocation, and action. One could read the Second Vatican Council's call for the renewal of moral theology in light of these three issues as well, a call to link our moral theological reflection and guidance in moral action with our identity and vocation.

The *Decree on Priestly Formation* speaks of moral theology being renewed under three rubrics. "Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching. It should show the nobility of the Christian vocation of the faithful, and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world" (Second Vatican Council, *Optatam Totius*, 1965: #16). I read these rubrics in terms of identity, vocation, and action. Who are we? Scripture as the story of the community—identity; Who are we to become? The nobility of the Christian vocation; What must we do to get there? Action—to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world (MacIntyre, 1984).

This call for renewal, however, was driven in part by a conviction that who we were as believers had had little impact on our moral theological reflection. Roman Catholic moral theology was known to be based on Natural Law arguments, for the most part divorced from faith convictions. In addition, post-Trent moral theology was largely defined by attention to confessional practice with a consequent excessive focus on individual acts (Mahoney, 1987). So, the challenge for moral theology to be more deeply informed by sacred scripture and its interpretation by the community over the centuries was a call to be rooted in our identity as believers.

COMMUNION AND THE RENEWAL OF MORAL THEOLOGY

Convinced that action flows from being and that our moral theological reflection needs to be more deeply rooted in our identity, I would like to reflect on our identity and its implications for moral theological reflection. I take as a starting point, however, that dimension of our identity and vocation which is communion. What would it mean to have our identity as a *communio* as our starting point?

Attention to *communio* is widespread today in theology. Communion ecclesiology, for example, recognizes God and human beings as a communion of persons. The Trinity expresses the relational dimension of our God, three equal persons, loving one another in community, a Trinity revealed to and experienced by us in Christ, the one sent by the Father who remains with us in His Spirit. Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God are intrinsically relational, called to communion with one another and with God (Doyle, 1999). John Paul II has written in *Ecclesia in America*:

God is communion, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, unity in distinction, and . . . he calls all people to share in that same Trinitarian communion. We must proclaim that this communion is the magnificent plan of God the Father; that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Lord, is the heart of this communion, and that the Holy Spirit works ceaselessly to create communion and to restore it when it is broken (John Paul II, 1999: #33).

From the standpoint of our faith, we are brought into this communion with God and with one another through the sacraments of initiation of the community. "Baptism is 'the doorway to the spiritual life'. . . . In confirmation, the baptized 'are joined more completely to the church'. . . . The journey of Christian initiation comes to completion and reaches its summit in the eucharist, which fully incorporates the baptized into the body of Christ" (John Paul II, 1999: #34). Communion is experienced most fully, then, when we "do" Church, when we celebrate our faith together. There, although imperfectly, we strive to be in complete communion with one another and with God. We are Church; we are communion; even as we strive to reflect it with greater integrity as a pilgrim Church on journey.

These reflections on *communio* as embodied in communion ecclesiology, describe both our identity and our vocation and have profound implications for the project of moral theology. The German moral theologian Klaus Demmer has written:

Moral truth is, by its very nature, the truth of one's life project. It demands from the person a dedicated life of commitment. The goals of one's life and the objectives of one's actions are outlined

and presented through it. This sheds light on the peculiarity of moral reason. Moral reason is not primarily a predetermined and standardized form of reason; rather, it is dynamic in that it continually probes and discovers new possibilities. In this way, the goals and objectives for life and action are uncovered and evaluated in light of freedom. There is a dialectical mediation between theory and praxis (Demmer, 104).

Moral theology is the science and art which offers wisdom to the community and individual members in the quest for human fulfillment. As Demmer notes, however, the very description or notion of human fulfillment arises from a particular understanding of the human person. Demmer says in another place: "The moral reason of the Christian operates within an anthropological system of coordinates. It is not presuppositionless" (Demmer, 109). Our presuppositions as we examine the implications of *communio* for moral theology are that we are made in the image and likeness of a God who is communion and has made us for communion with one another and with God.

I will consider briefly three sub-disciplines of moral theology in light of this call to communion: sexual ethics, social ethics, and bioethics. In each case, I would like to focus on how the understanding of the human person as intrinsically relational and called to communion informs or should inform the reasoning process in these distinct disciplines.

Sexual Ethics

There is a humorous line which attempted to summarize sexual ethics in the Church. When the old manuals treated sexual morality, it was always in the context of the sixth and ninth commandments. Since the material was covered in Latin, it was the treatise entitled "De sexto et nono." Translation: "Concerning sex and the answer is 'No! No!'" The statement is comical and has a ring of truth to it. But how many people knew why the Church taught that specific sexual acts were wrong? What reasons were given to justify the moral evaluation?

In fact, the reason for the rightness or wrongness of sexual expression and even the understanding of sexuality itself was very limited in moral theology prior to its renewal in this century. One tended to speak of the "faculty" or purpose of sexual organs as if they existed apart from people. Their primary purpose was for procreation with little attention paid to what today we refer to as the unitive meaning of sexuality, its interpersonal dimension. Critical in the revisioning of sexual ethics has been a more comprehensive view of the role of sexuality in the lives of people. The vocabulary itself has changed in that we now speak of sexuality as well as sex.

In their 1991 document, "Human Sexuality: Education for Lifelong Learning," the United States Bishops describe sexuality as:

a dimension of one's restless heart, which continually yearns for interpersonal communion, glimpsed and experienced to varying degrees in this life, ultimately finding full oneness only in God, here and hereafter. . . . [Sexuality is] a fundamental component of personality in and through which we, as male or female, experience our relatedness to self, others, the world, and even God (NCCB, 1991: 9).

The bishops recognize sexuality for what it really is: the drive for communion placed in us by God; communion with one another and, ultimately, with God. Any approach to sexual ethics which fails to take into account this fundamental view of the human person as relational is inadequate.

In the writings of John Paul II this view of sexuality is most evident in his theology of marriage where he understands the married couple as a communion of persons whose total gift of self to each other enriches their own relationship and may well bear fruit in children, the embodiment of married love. This broadens the communion of persons from the married couple alone to the family unity which John Paul II views as the seed of society. His words to the family in *Familiaris Consortio* highlight in particular the identity, vocation, and call to action of the family: "Become who you are," he says simply. That is, become a communion of persons (John Paul II, 1981: #17).

Social Ethics

Figuring out appropriate social relationships especially in terms of obligation and duties has always been difficult. Some claim that justice is primarily about giving to persons their due on the basis of merit; others, on the basis of need; still others argue that it entails equal distribution of goods to all. The Christian tradition recalls the biblical notion of justice as "right relationships" with everyone, surely a more vague notion of justice in terms of explicit demands, but more sweeping in its obligation to discern whether one is genuinely in right relationship with others or not. When one recalls the fourfold dimension of relationality, i.e. self, others, God, and all creation, the domain of social ethics expands even more.

My focus will be on social ethics as articulated in the social teaching of the Church. Michael J. Schuck has argued that all the social teaching of the Church, which he traces back not to Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum*, but to Benedict XIV in 1740, is grounded in what he calls a communitarian ethic (Schuck, especially 173–93). If this is true, and it seems so to me, it has only been reaffirmed in the writings of John Paul II. His emphasis on the virtue of solidarity echoes through his social encyclicals as when he writes that solidarity is the proper response to the human community's "awareness of interdependence."

Solidarity is “not a feeling of vague compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, both near and far. On the contrary, it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all” (John Paul II, 1987: #38).

Noteworthy in the Pope’s words here is the call for a public virtue of solidarity. Kenneth Himes notes that our tradition has always spoken of the virtuous life but on the personal level. Here, John Paul pays “attention to the role of virtue in the development of social life” (Himes, 167). This communitarian ethic may seem perfectly obvious in terms of social ethics. But a word of caution is in order. We live in a society in which great emphasis is placed on individual rights. The Church and moral theologians themselves have emphasized the importance of human rights, and correctly so. However, we must be careful about what ultimately grounds our moral reasoning. When pushed to the extreme, where do we stand? Rights language tends to be adversarial whereas the ecclesiology of communion and a communitarian ethic remind us of our essential relationship with one another. As Himes points out, “Belonging, respect, friendship, forgiveness, love are essential to human well-being, but they are not easily addressed by the language and concept of rights” (Himes, 166).

Thus in social ethics, as well as sexual ethics, the anthropological presuppositions of our intrinsic relatedness play themselves out, affirming again our identity, calling for the fulfillment of our vocation, and bringing forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.

Bioethics

What of bioethics? When I was studying for my licentiate degree in Madrid a fellow student from Colombia criticized the bourgeois ethical concerns of the First World, the United States in particular, claiming we rack our brains over reproductive technologies, withholding and withdrawing treatment in healthcare and similar issues, while people in the Third World are deprived of the necessities of life. I responded that the plight of the Third World does not erase the ethical concerns of the First World, but I knew that my answer was inadequate. His point was made. More attention must be paid to the wider community and to questions of justice in bioethics.

Bioethics has, from the beginning, often been viewed as a discipline with a fierce defense of the rights of the individual, in reaction, understandably, to abuses during the second World War in Nazi concentration camps where people suffered experimentation without their knowledge or consent. The result, at least at the beginning of bioethics, was a strong emphasis on autonomy as the overriding principle to guide right behavior. Concern for the wishes of the patient was primary.

However, this was soon found to be wanting. What of obligations to family? To the larger society? Is any use of scarce resources ethical as long as the patient has the economic wherewithal? What of the physician's own sense of what ought or ought not be done? Ruth Macklin once captured the development in methods of bioethics in a clever parody of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." She begins: "In the first wave of ethics, the method sent to me: respect for auto-ho-no-my." By the time the twelfth wave of ethics comes around, interestingly enough, she is singing: "In the twelfth wave of ethics, the method sent to me: twelve communitarians. . . ." We are back to a communitarian ethic.

Recognizing the web of human relations, there are those who, while still fiercely guarding the principle of autonomy, attend more carefully to the complex of issues and relationships. They recognize that health and well-being are much more than curing and that often the deeper healing that needs to occur for those who suffer is in terms of relationships. An old medieval adage about the role of medicine says it all: Cure sometimes, relieve often, comfort always. At times, insufficient reflection on the reality and experience of suffering, when human life is threatened, leads to inadequate and superficial responses.

An ethics arising from our relationality places issues of bioethics within the context of the call to communion as the essence of human life and fulfillment. John Paul II says in *Evangelium Vitae*: "The meaning of life is to be found in giving and receiving love" (John Paul II, 1995: #81). This fundamental truth about our lives together as human beings must play a critical role in dealing with issues in bioethics.

In all three specializations of moral theology one can identify the underlying concern for communion among moral agents, not just within a faith community but among all human beings. This concern reflects our identity and vocation as human beings, in particular as believers, and guides our moral action whether in sexual, social, or biomedical ethics.

CONSCIENCE AND THE CALL TO COMMUNION

Having examined the various sub-disciplines of moral theology in light of communion, I would like to focus on one area in particular, the formation and exercise of conscience, and address the significance of our identity as relational beings and how the Christian community, the Roman Catholic community in particular, plays a critical role in the development and exercise of conscience.

Contemporary moral theology describes conscience under three dimensions: conscience as a capacity to know the good (*synderesis*); conscience as a process of gathering information and hearing wisdom in order to discern what the good is in a particular dilemma (moral science); and conscience as a moral judgment which impels one to act

(Gula; O'Connell). The advantage of this description of conscience is that it encompasses its complexity. Former inadequate descriptions of conscience limited to judgment alone were insufficient; descriptions which portrayed conscience primarily as simply "following the laws or rules" or doing one's duty were also incomplete.

This more comprehensive view of conscience begins not with the specific judgment that a person makes about a particular moral crisis in his or her life, but rather with Christian optimism that human beings are made by God with a desire for the good and a capacity to know what the good is. This is a "given" about us as human beings before we even begin to address moments of judgment in our moral lives. If the whole moral enterprise is about seeking authentic human good it is conscience which ultimately directs the moral agent toward that end.

Without forcing these categories too much, one could draw attention again to identity, vocation, and action regarding these dimensions of conscience. The call to communion as well as the interdependence and relationality of humanity are operative at each moment in the formation and exercise of conscience. This is immensely important to recall since one often gets the impression that one stands alone in exercising one's conscience. Granted the moral agent is ultimately responsible for her action, yet when she acts it is always as a relational subject.

So, the first dimension harks back to the identity question because it addresses who we are as human beings—people created with a desire for and a capacity to know the good. Yet, as we have said, the human good always involves communion, no matter what dimension of humanity is being addressed.

The communal dimension of this first aspect of conscience does not lie simply in a description of the good, however. Rather one learns the good within the context of community. The extent to which the desire and capacity for the good are realized depends not simply on the disposition of the moral agent but also on those entrusted with his formation and care. How has the community nurtured or stifled this desire? How does it name the good? How has it helped the moral agent to recognize who she is and how constitutive the call to communion is to goodness itself? The degree to which goodness is desired and understood affects the quality of the exercise of conscience in the second and third instances.

The second dimension of conscience, the "information-gathering" stage, refers to one's attempt to learn all that one can about a particular moral dilemma one is facing and the appropriateness of contemplated responses to the issue. Here, too, the call to communion and the interdependence and relationality of the person are operative. Conscience at this stage presumes that we need others to discover truth. *Gaudium et spes* #16 states that "Christians are joined with the rest of [humanity] in

the search for truth, and for the genuine solution to the numerous problems which arise in the life of individuals and from social relationships." The narrower the search for truth, the weaker, morally, one approaches the judgment stage. The less dependent one is on the community—as broadly as that is interpreted in this instance—the greater the threat of moral myopia and self-deception.

Finally, one makes a judgment of conscience. It is particularly here that one could "privatize" conscience assuming that the judgment made is of concern to the moral agent alone. Yet the call to communion enters here as well—at least in a couple of ways. First of all, we are responsible for our judgments not simply to ourselves, but to others as well. Sidney Callahan captures this well when she writes

In the process of moral decision making, we can, through critical self-reflection, assess our reasons and intuitions, our own past and present actions, our personal emotions, our motives, our aspirations, our remembered images, our mentors and teachers, and so on. Many have noted that the inner self-self moral dialogue is to a great extent based upon past experiences of interpersonal dialogues, from either actual experience or vicarious experiences through literature, Scripture, or cultural stories. The inner, self-assessing dialogue can be engaged in, not only to work things out for ourselves, but also to prepare us to morally justify to others what, why, and how we are deciding. If we are going to stand upon our own decisions, we must convince ourselves and be prepared to convince others if challenged (Callahan, 20).

So the community and our relationship to the community are at work here as well.

A second way that the call to communion is evident regards not the individual's responsibility or accountability to the community, but the community's to the moral agent. Who will support people in their choice for good? Where will they find the wherewithal to carry on knowing that a right judgment of conscience may well bring suffering? They must know that they are not alone in their choice and that the community which shaped them to know goodness and assisted them in discerning it, will stand with them as they judge in favor of it. We need the community on all levels to remind us who we are, who we are to become, and to support us as we judge in favor of those actions consistent with the above two.

CONCLUSION

We are a people of *communio*, called to communion with ourselves, with others, with God, and with all of creation. In freedom and in community we are to shape ourselves as a communion of persons.

One could argue that Thomas More broke communion with his friends and with his family by choosing as he did. Yet in the end his choice found him in communion with himself, with his Church, and with his God. He realized that any other choice would have disfigured him and he willingly went to death rather than to compromise his self. He simply would not budge, not out of stubbornness, but out of firm conviction and love. Drawing on his communion with God and the Church, and indeed with his communion with his true self, he acted as only he could.

At the beginning I remarked that the primary place where the faith community encounters God and is called into communion with God and others is in the sacramental life of the Church, particularly in the Eucharist. At Eucharist we are Church; we are nurtured in communion; action flows from being as we mirror, imperfectly, the communion we seek. The American bishops addressed this call to communion, to attend to the other in their pastoral on the economy from 1986 when they wrote:

As people of a new covenant, the faithful hear God's challenging word proclaimed to them—a message of hope to the poor and oppressed—and they call upon the Holy Spirit to unite all into one body of Christ. For the Eucharist to be a living promise of the fullness of God's Kingdom, the faithful must commit themselves to living as redeemed people with the same care and love for all people that Jesus showed. The body of Christ which worshipers receive in Communion is also a reminder of the reconciling power of his death on the Cross. It empowers them to work to heal the brokenhearted of society and human relationships and to grow in a spirit of self-giving for others (NCCB, #330).

It reminds us again of John Paul II's "We are all responsible for all." Christ's words "Do this in memory of me," heard Eucharist after Eucharist, bring together identity, vocation, and action. A contemporary song captures it as well: "We are the body of Christ, broken and poured out, . . . we are the Body of Christ." But it is not just our identity; it is who we are to become, our vocation. "Become who you are," says John Paul II, referring to the nobility of the Christian vocation. And it is a call to action: "Do this in memory of me." In the doing we affirm our identity and fulfill our vocation. For this reason Paul could say to the community at Corinth: "As often as you do this you proclaim the death of the Lord until he comes" (1 Cor 11: 26). Unless the body of the community and its members is being broken and their blood poured out the Lord is not proclaimed. Our communion is achieved ultimately in the gift of self, the total gift of self which is in turn life-giving for self and for others. Thomas More's life was such a gift.

A moral theology which draws upon this understanding of the human person and attends to it in all aspects of the discipline will not only draw from the community in the formation of its members but nourish the community in turn with people who truly are a communion of persons, the Body of Christ, doing all in memory of Him.

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