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## Morality and Prayer

Richard McCormick, S.J., died last February. One of the leading figures in Catholic moral theology during the post-conciliar era, his passing reminds us that many of the giants who forged the renewal of moral theology are aging. Franz Böckle and Bernard Häring have already died, Josef Fuchs and Louis Janssens have retired. These men (and all the influential moral theologians of their generation were men) found much of their theological agenda determined by the needs of *aggiornamento*. The need to move beyond the legalism of the manuals to a more biblically rooted moral vision, the crisis of authority after *Humanae vitae*, the debates over proportionalism as a theory of moral norms—all these concerns drew the attention and energy of eminent scholars. Add to the above the so-called “sexual revolution,” the emergence of bioethics as a sub-discipline, and the renewed interest in the ethics of nuclear strategy and modern warfare, and it becomes easy to see why for decades moral theology was largely, though not exclusively, concentrated on resolving problems of normative ethics. In such a climate it was the ethical analysis of actions and determination of the appropriate material norms for behavior that loomed large.

But we are now witnessing a change in the theological conversation. Anyone attending the sessions on moral theology at the last several conventions of the Catholic Theological Society of America would be struck by the shift of interests among many of the scholars who have given papers and made comments during the subsequent discussions. As noted, the previous era did not ignore other aspects of the moral life but it did demonstrate a concentration on normative ethics; now, without ignoring that dimension, the focus is moving to the study and analysis of the moral actor more than moral acts. Expressions such as “virtue ethics” or “character ethics” are used to express the altered

focus. While there are various approaches and a number of distinctions which can be made in this realm, the essential point is that the human person has become the primary object of study. This has given rise to a flood of writings on topics such as the formation of conscience, the nature of virtue and the import of the virtues for moral character, the role of the emotions in the moral life, and the importance of imagination and moral narratives.

Among the key aspects being discussed in this shifting of focus for the discipline is the relationship of the moral life and the spiritual life, in particular communal and personal prayer. For a time the reality of prayer was not a major concern of moral theologians except insofar as it generated moral obligations, i.e., the obligation to attend Mass on Sunday, the duty of clerics to recite the Divine Office, the requirement that all the faithful make their Easter duty. This outlook was in keeping with a legalistic approach to the moral life and the practice of treating moral theology as a discipline separate from ascetical theology.

Two important authors in the early stage of renewal, Häring and the Irish theologian Enda McDonagh, were forerunners in the effort to highlight the interaction of morality and prayer. Now with renewed interest in the moral formation of the person there is growing attention to the import of prayer as a major factor in moral experience. The nexus of morality and prayer is complex in the writings of contemporary moral theologians but it is possible to outline the connection using four general categories: interiority, motivation, formation and discernment.

**INTERIORITY:** A number of authors have seen prayer as central to avoiding the legalistic temptation in the moral life. One can obey rules and perform deeds with external rectitude yet lack any inner life of faith, hope and love. As numerous authors have pointed out, conversion is at the heart of the moral life and genuine conversion embraces the entire person including the affections. It is not enough to do the right thing. A disciple ought to love the Good in response to God's love. Authors such as Edward Vacek and Mark O'Keefe have each made the case that the foundational touchstone for the moral life of the believer is an experience of God's love. Morality is the response of the grateful disciple to love God and the desire to love what God loves, the neighbor.

Enda McDonagh suggests that when understood this way the moral life is situated within a dynamic of call and response with the first move always being God's call to enter into a loving covenant. The inadequacy of human love in the face of divine love impels the disciple not only to act rightly but to offer praise and thanksgiving. In short, prayer and especially adoration are necessary responses to God once we realize the modest nature of our best moral accomplishments. Thus,

it becomes difficult to envision the moral life in a semi-pelagian framework which views the moral life as our way of earning our salvation. Morality is but one element in the ongoing dynamic of conversion, the turning of the disciple towards God.

**MOTIVATION:** It is a commonplace to observe that human beings are driven by an array of values, fears, hopes, needs and desires. Rarely do we act out of a single motive even if we are not conscious of all that propels us to do something. No surprise, then, that moral theologians are concerned with understanding the complex forces that lead us to make our moral choices. Part of moral growth is purifying our motives so that we avoid T. S. Eliot's famous statement of the final treason, "to do the right thing for the wrong reason." Prayer understood broadly as "attending to God" can assist the disciple in focusing on God and divine activity. This, in turn, may allow the converted person to act in the service of love rather than for a lesser motive. It is not that we can avoid having a mixture of motives but moral action rooted in prayer does hold out the possibility that a conscious choice to act in love becomes more prominent as we seek deeper union with God.

Another aspect of motivation is that often the challenge of acting morally is not first of all a matter of intellect (we lack knowledge of what is right) but rather the challenge is at another level (we know what to do but struggle to muster the energy to do what is right). To a great degree it is a matter of passion, coming to desire the good more than a lesser object which attracts us. Training our passions to seek the good is one of the benefits of a mature spiritual life. By encountering the Lord in the practice of regular prayer we find a new object of desire, a new source of energy which draws our passion. Prayer allows us to re-appropriate and deepen our commitment to God so that we come to desire the goods of this life in their proper order.

**FORMATION:** In his most recent book Timothy O'Connell has taken up the question: How does the Christian community actually transmit values and vision to its members? He notes that often individuals will know a theory of the moral life, may even be quite articulate in explaining the process of conversion and the life of discipleship. But that is not the same as actually undergoing conversion and living discipleship. Too often we have settled for education of the mind but have not grappled successfully with formation of character, our own and that of others. O'Connell's helpful volume examines the process whereby we actually grasp values and pass them on to others.

Without attempting to summarize his conclusions, I want to note that a key element in moral formation is the significance of images which reside and dominate our imaginations. It is our imagination which enables us to enter into the experience of others and to recall our own

experiences. Imagination is an internal re-living of external events, our own or others. What images take up residence in our imaginations is conditioned by a number of things but one major factor is the set of narratives we use to identify ourselves and understand basic human experiences of life, birth, death, sickness, love, betrayal, success, failure, kindness, etc. People who regularly reflect upon and pray over the Bible will find their understanding of human experience in these narratives and will be a community whose vision is formed by a particular set of metaphors, myths, parables and stories. A person who actively participates in such a community, especially the rituals and practices of that community inspired by the narratives, is likely to be someone powerfully shaped by the values of the community. And frequent, regular engagement with the communal prayer of such a community can lead to ever deeper appropriation of the community's values.

**DISCERNMENT:** Richard Gula is a moral theologian who has discussed the final category for discussing the relationship of prayer and morality, that of discernment and its role in decision-making. There are several ways in which prayer plays a role in the process of making a choice. In decision-making we hope to be as free and conscious as we can be about what is going on within and around us. Thus, we hope to liberate ourselves from any illusions, biases or inordinate dependencies. Prayer can be clarifying and liberating by helping us center properly on ourselves and God. The experience of God's love can free us from petty and illusory loves that claim us illegitimately as well as strengthen us to see reality as it is without the need to create a false security or comfort in order to feel good about ourselves. Prayer can put us at peace and in touch with reality.

Prayer can not only dispose us to choose well, it can reveal aspects of reality that help us to see the nature of what is at stake. Many people have practiced individual or group ways of discerning the spirit which assists people in decision-making. Through a method of prayer such as the Ignatian exercises it is possible to see deeper into the nature of a situation and understand what it is that God is asking of us. And, of course, a final role for prayer in moral discernment is that of validating a decision. A sense of serenity and peace before God in prayer can be an experience of confirmation that a moral choice is in keeping with one's sense of self and God.

**CONCLUSION:** Much more could be said about the relationship of prayer and the moral life. What is evident, however, is the tremendous increase in interest among moralists in exploring connections between an important dimension of our religious practice and our moral experience. A number of recent works may be cited as good examples of this development in moral theology today.

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