

CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGY, IGNATIAN SPIRITUALITY, AND VIRTUE ETHICS

Strange Bedfellows

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CONTEMPORARY MORAL THEOLOGY has led us from an occupation with specific kinds of particular wrong actions (lying, killing, inappropriate sexual conduct etc.) to a much broader reflection on the entirety of the person standing before God. To realize this change, many moral theologians have begun re-examining the virtues.¹ There they have been able to address questions about the type of persons we ought to become and the virtuous practices that we ought to engage in in order to realize that moral vision.

Moral theologians have also recognized the importance of the claims of Norbert Rigali who has argued for the need to integrate the vision of the moral life into a living spirituality.² Such a spirituality could both root the moral virtues in a relationship with God and neighbour and provide a vision of the type of Christian and the type of church we ought to become. In a word, the moral life could be a virtuous response to a spirituality that animates us both individually and communally.

Yet, as easy as it may seem to be to develop a virtue ethics out of Ignatian spirituality, we must recognize that for the greater part of its history, Catholic moral theology has been interested in neither spirituality nor the virtues, but rather predominantly in particular kinds of specific wrong actions. This nearly inherent tendency cannot be underestimated: indeed, already there are voices summoning moralists back to actions and away from the virtues and spirituality.

I begin this essay by presenting the contributions of three English Jesuits who convey both the possibility and the extraordinary challenge that lies before us in developing a virtue ethics out of Ignatian spirituality. Then, I argue that virtue ethics is rather congruent with the

aims of Ignatian spirituality and can serve as a worthy vehicle for expressing a morality stemming from such a spirituality.

John Mahoney's argument: moral theology's obsession with sin and its need for spirituality

In *The making of moral theology*, Jesuit ethicist John Mahoney demonstrates convincingly that the roots of moral theology are found in the practice of confessing sins.³ To guide the confessor in determining the nature of sin and its suitable penance, 'penitentials' were reproduced throughout Europe from the sixth to twelfth century.⁴ In these penitentials, the general classifications of moral conduct were described in terms of particular external actions: the lie, the act of theft, the blasphemous word, the adultery etc. From these books, moral theology developed its primary interest in sin and identified sin as these particular external acts that corresponded to one of the seven deadly sins. Moral theology during these many centuries showed no sense of idealism or vision; it showed no concern for Christian identity nor for spirituality; and there is no developed concept of discipleship. Judgment day alone was its central preoccupation, where persons' deeds in lieu of their hearts were scrutinized.

The growth of religious orders and their work of evangelization of the emerging towns was a hallmark of the thirteenth century. This period emphasized not the decay but the possible growth of the Christian. Ironically this movement was in part circumvented by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), when Pope Innocent III imposed the Easter duty, making the turn to penance no longer a matter of spiritual election but ecclesiastical law. Henry Lea called this 'the most important legislative act in the history of the Church'.⁵

For the next three centuries, then, two types of moral instructions developed: the great *Summae theologiae* of high Scholasticism and the confessional manuals which were effectively sophisticated penitentials. Clearly, Thomas Aquinas' *Summa* represents the greatest achievement from this time. There he presented three parts, each representing a movement: God's movement towards us, our movement toward God, the two movements in the incarnation of Jesus Christ, both human and divine. Thomas directs the reader in pursuit of the end, which is union with God and is achieved through charity; he provides the virtues, the cardinal ones for the moral life and the theological ones for the spiritual life (together, the seven virtues embody the end for all Christians); and he presents intentionality and not external deeds as the proper concern for determining moral living. Though other Scholastics share Thomas'

concern with interiority, the virtues and the integrated anthropological vision, by the fourteenth century moral reflection begins again to focus not on who we are or who we ought to become, but on what we did wrong. While Thomas held that 'all moral matter comes down to the virtues',⁶ those with a less integrated view of the person preferred simply to look at the confessional manuals that stretch from Innocent's edict until the Reformation.

Recent studies have shown that the moral reasoning of the sixteenth and seventeenth century was highly innovative in meeting the needs of the Europeans who through the explorations of the New World and trade with the East could no longer accept the older moral methods of the past. To answer those new and urgent needs, a new moral method rose quickly that looked not to existing principles but rather to cases. That new method of looking at cases was known as casuistry.⁷ But regardless of the new method, the content of moral theology was the same: to determine which actions were forbidden and which ones were permitted. Moreover, from the eighteenth through the twentieth century that imaginative casuistry evolved into the rather unimaginative moral manuals of theology, which were textbooks, again for confessors.

A survey of the history of moral theology, then, shows that with few exceptions, moral theology has been nearly exclusively concerned with sins, that is, with particular actions determined to be wrong. Mahoney is right, then, to make the claim that he does: the roots of moral theology are in its obsession with sin as external actions, but Mahoney also insists that, excepting Thomas, moral theologians have never done what they were always called to do, to recognize morality as a response to the Spirit's movements in our lives.⁸

Thomas Slater's argument: separate morality and spirituality

If an English Jesuit is the clearest writer criticizing the sin legacy of morality and the strongest champion of morality's need to be rooted in a spirituality, it is another English Jesuit who is Mahoney's historical nemesis. At the beginning of this century the first moral manual in English appeared, written by Thomas Slater. In his famous preface he describes the manuals of moral theology as:

technical works intended to help the confessor and the parish priest in the discharge of their duties. They are as technical as the text-books of the lawyer and the doctor. They are not intended for edification, nor do they hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful. They deal with what is of obligation under pain of sin; they are books of moral pathology.

After discussing the 'very abundant' literature of ascetical theology, he added,

moral theology proposes to itself the much humbler but still necessary task of defining what is right and what wrong in all the practical relations of the Christian life . . . The first step on the right road of conduct is to avoid evil.⁹

Thirty years later another English Jesuit, Henry Davis, wrote: 'It is precisely about the law that Moral Theology is concerned. It is not a mirror of perfection, showing man the way of perfection.'¹⁰

Moral theology then has been simply about sin and its avoidance. Moral theology has not concerned itself with the positive task of growing as a disciple of Christ. Slater helps explain, then, why virtue language, outside of Thomistic theology, is so rare in moral theology: it was not interested in the development of the person; that task was left to those in ascetical or spiritual theology.

Robert Persons' achievement: a foundational work of Ignatian spirituality that led to a moral theology

Ironically one of the rare instances of developing a morality out of a spirituality via the virtues was achieved in England by the early moderate Puritans, using Ignatian spirituality. That tale, worth telling, gives us a clue of what we can do for the future.

Early British Puritan practical divinity developed out of the Roman Catholic devotional works of Christian perfection or spirituality.¹¹ Among these works was the Jesuit Robert Persons' *The first booke of the Christian exercise*. No contemporary work of devotion compared to it, 'the most popular book of devotion among both Catholics and Protestants in Elizabethan and Jacobean England'.¹² The first edition appeared just after Persons' escape from England at the time of Edmund Campion's arrest in 1582. Two years later, the Puritan Edmund Bunny 'protestantized' that edition and then a subsequent one. By 1640, the original Catholic edition went through more than seven editions; the Puritan versions went through more than forty-five editions!

More remarkable than the fact that a Puritan pirated a Jesuit writing is the fact that Bunny's editing of the text was rather slight. More than 90 per cent of the Jesuit text remains intact in the Puritan text.¹³ From this text, subsequent Puritans built a morality. Having examined the self and found the need for resolution, the next generation of Puritans asked questions about discerning the certitude of salvation; about the

way of being vigilant of temptation; about the need for developing a proper household and for ordering one's life through practices etc. These later texts began with introverted self-examinations but proceeded to build the person up from within, using the virtues to guide the reader into becoming a more ardent Christian.¹⁴

While Puritans were innovative with these spiritual texts, Roman Catholics continued to distinguish works of morality (casuistic manuals about sinful deeds) from spiritual manuals. For instance, besides doing his major devotional opus, Persons wrote his own small casuistic manual with Dr William Allen.¹⁵ Catholic moral theology resisted any sustained attempts at developing out of a spirituality an ethics of character.

The Puritans were interested in Persons' spiritual text because it impressed on them the deep need to examine oneself before God. Through a series of meditative reflections, Persons approached the reader with the insights of the First Week of *The spiritual exercises*. Prompting them to tread through the marshy untrampled terrain of their own deplorably unexamined life of sin, Persons guided the reader gently but repeatedly by the controlling insight of the First Principle and Foundation.

Basically the work considers sin's violent affront to God; the exercitant's affective awakening to the offence; the tangible appreciation of the harm that sin brings to the exercitant; the realization that though the exercitant merits eternal damnation, God has kept the exercitant until this point from death and just judgement; and, finally, the appreciation of what Christ has done through his death for the sake of the exercitant. It is a contemplation on the state of one's soul, an invitation to experience one's own condition and to see therein the appalling state of one's sinfulness. This is not a sinfulness of specific actions catalogued in casuistic manuals; on the contrary, it locates the tragedy of sin in the profoundly distorted relationship between a loving, merciful but just God and a wickedly obtuse reader. This sinfulness is rooted in one separated from Christ because of inconsideration.

The self-examination here is different from any in the Catholic works seen earlier. Unlike those works that start with wrong actions and recede into the agent's intentionality, Persons' point of departure is always the reader; he bypasses ever starting with an external action or its causal intention. Persons turns not to the effects of sin, but much more profoundly towards its root: the negligent, unthinking and ungrateful heart.

A solution: building a virtue ethics out of Ignatian spirituality

If Persons could develop a major work of spiritual devotion out of the *Exercises*, we can develop a virtue ethics out of the insights of the *Exercises*. To begin this project, I offer ten foundational points which illustrate similarity between Ignatian spirituality and a virtue ethics.

The priority of the spiritual. Because Ignatian spirituality so stresses the initiative of God as prior to the individual's response, then a virtue ethics in this context is always subsequent to God's movement. The Puritans recognized this: they developed a virtue ethics from Ignatian spirituality, not vice versa.

Instances of the opposite movement would be where a moral principle shapes a spirituality, e.g. the Pro-Life movement, Pax Christi, Bread for the World. In Ignatian spirituality, God shapes the participants and they in turn seek virtues to express their response. In this way, both the spirituality and the moral agenda have extraordinary breadth and are not restricted by a particular principle.

Morality as a response. Throughout the *Exercises*, there are two striking movements: on the one hand, the exercitant is constantly seeing God's movement toward him or her, supporting her; on the other hand, the exercitant is constantly being prompted to offer him or her whole self, whether in the offering of the meditation on the Kingdom¹⁶ or the *Suscipe* in the final contemplation.¹⁷

Since the offering is one's self, an ethics of character rather than an ethics of principles governing particular actions suitably embodies that response. As the exercitant offers him- or herself, they offer the possibility of becoming more in the image of Christ who saves them.

Deep interiority. As we saw above, the Puritans were attracted to Persons' Ignatian writings because of their deep interiority. In developing a moral theology they did not turn to principles which govern actions, but virtues which perfect dispositions. As a morality responding to a spirituality, the former emerged from the depths of the latter.

The uniqueness of the individual. Though the Puritans may not have grasped this insight (after all they only appropriated from the First Week of the *Exercises*), Ignatian spirituality has always appreciated the uniqueness of the individual. The exercitant is always urged to deepen their unique relationship with the Lord by seeing that Jesus Christ has done 'all this for me'. For this reason, Ignatius warns the director never to get between the exercitant and the Lord but rather to 'permit the Creator to deal directly with the creature, and the creature directly with his Creator and Lord'.¹⁸

The orientation to safeguard an individual's prayer complemented the Jesuit defence of the individual conscience, where the individual

person heard their own distinctive call and worked out their relationship with the Lord.¹⁹

Likewise, the virtues perfect an individual's dispositions uniquely. For this reason, we think of the virtues as tailor-made. Each person tries to find the mean appropriate for a particular person's dispositions. The mean of virtue is, then, the mean as it relates to the specific agent.²⁰ As Thomas put it, the virtues are second nature.

The need for self-examination. Persons rightly proposed the practice of self-examination as a central component in the *Exercises*. For instance, we hear the triple question right in the very first colloquy of the First Week: 'What have I done for Christ?' 'What am I doing for Christ?' 'What ought I do for Christ?'²¹

In his important work *After virtue*, Alasdair MacIntyre says that there are three central questions to virtue ethics: 'Who am I?' 'Who ought I to become?' 'What steps ought I take to become that person?'²² MacIntyre's questions move from self-examination to an expression of goals to finally a discernment of means to achieve those goals. His questions are similar to the triple question of the exercitant, for in those questions the person sees who they are and who they are called to be as a disciple of Christ. Knowing what she or he ought to do for Christ is effectively to prepare her- or himself for the tasks that lie ahead.

An ongoing task. The self-examination is not simply a once-for-all event. On the contrary, inasmuch as we are each called to be more and more the persons whom Christ wants us to be, Ignatian spirituality calls us to a regular reflection (see the *Constitutions* 261, 342, 344) of where we are in our journey with Christ. The ongoing reflection is necessary so that by knowing our Lord and ourselves better we can better both determine the virtuous ends that we should be pursuing as well as assess the steps already taken. Since the virtues were first articulated, the acquisition of virtue has been known as a dynamic, lifelong process of reflection and intended practice.

Exercises. The standard expression that Thomas uses to describe how one acquires a virtuous disposition is 'exercise'. The intended exercises of temperance, for instance, lead to the acquisition of temperance. Thomas even talks about 'spiritual exercises' when he asks why all the effects of sin are not taken away by baptism. He writes, 'This is suitable for our spiritual training (*spirituale exercitium*): namely, in order that by fighting against concupiscence and other defects to which he is subject, man may receive the crown of victory'.²³

This training is central, then, to both the spirituality of the *Exercises*, where the exercitant repeats meditations and contemplations to pursue

the invitation to greater union with God, and to morality, where a person engages regularly in intended and repeated practices in pursuit of particular virtues. It is not coincidental that Ignatius appropriated a word known both among devotional movements in Spain as well as among proponents of the virtues in Paris.

A prudent director. Virtue theory, because it recognizes the difficulty in acquiring the virtues, acknowledges that the first sign of growth is the ability to find a prudent adviser.²⁴ In order to determine the mean in one's life one needs experience and reasoned insight but, to acquire that, one needs to depend on those who are able to appreciate one's own situation in life.

Both the life of Ignatian spirituality and the life of virtue require a mentoring companion. However, in both cases, the mentor is not teaching some propositional utterances about something, but rather is helping the apprentice understand how growth occurs in his or her particular life so as to find the right exercises that will lead them to greater discipleship and greater self-guidance.

An appreciation for human feeling. Thomas always saw the passions as essential to the acquisition and development of virtuous passion.²⁵ Hugo Rahner points out in his important work²⁶ that the regular 'application of senses' (a clear innovation in spirituality) taught the exercitant the importance of familiarity with one's feelings in order to discern properly.

A vision of the end. Whereas the previous nine points highlight the compatibility of virtue ethics with Ignatian spirituality, this final one illustrates a dramatic point of intersection. The end of the *Exercises* is the First Principle and Foundation, that is, to serve God alone. That end is the same for a virtue ethics in the Christian tradition.²⁷

There are other points of similarity, especially those that deal with specific virtues, like charity, gratitude, obedience, availability and humility. But as we close we should recognize that though moral theology (see Slater) has had little interest in spirituality, it has had a need for it (see Mahoney). Spirituality, however, has always recognized its need for moral theology, but of a particular type. Spirituality, especially Ignatian spirituality, has always recognized the need for morality, perhaps not one of principles governing external acts, but rather one of the virtues (see *Constitutions* 308, 334, 338, 339, 340, 361, 401, 404, 423, 434, 481, 484, 486, 516, 518, 659) dealing with the development of character in service to God who is always calling us to follow Christ.

NOTES

¹ James Keenan, 'Proposing cardinal virtues', *Theological Studies* 56.4 (1995), pp 709–729; *idem*, *Virtues for ordinary Christians* (Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996); Jean Porter, *The recovery of virtue: the relevance of Aquinas for Christian ethics* (Louisville: Westminster, 1990).

² Rigali's essays are numerous; a few salient ones are, 'The unity of the moral order', *Chicago Studies* 8 (1969), pp 125–143; 'Christian ethics and perfection', *Chicago Studies* 14 (1975), pp 227–240; 'The future of Christian morality', *Chicago Studies* 20 (1981), pp 281–289; 'The unity of moral and pastoral truth', *Chicago Studies* 25 (1986), pp 224–232. Recent writers on the topic include: Dennis Billy and Donna Orsuto (eds), *Spirituality and morality: integrating prayer and action* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1996); James Keating, 'The good life', *Church* 11.2 (1995), pp 15–20; James Keenan, 'Morality and spirituality', *Church* 12.3 (1996), pp 40–42; Mark O'Keefe, *Becoming good, becoming holy: on the relationship of Christian ethics and spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1995).

³ John Mahoney, *The making of moral theology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987).

⁴ John T. McNeill and Helen M. Gamer (eds), *Medieval handbooks of penance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁵ Henry Lea, *The history of auricular confession and indulgences in the Latin Church* (Philadelphia: Lea Brothers, 1896), 1.230; see Kilian McDonnell, 'The *Summa Confessorum* on the integrity of confession as prolegomena for Luther and Trent', *Theological Studies* 54 (1993), pp 405–427; Thomas Tentler, *Sin and confession on the eve of the Reformation* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1977); Miriam Turrini, *La coscienza e le leggi: morale e diritto nei testi per la confessione della prima Età moderna* (Bologna: Società editrice il Mulino, 1991).

⁶ *Summa theologiae* II-II, Prologue, 'Sic igitur tota materia morali ad considerationem virtutum reducta'. On Thomas see Leonard Boyle, *The setting of the Summa Theologiae of Saint Thomas* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1982); James Keenan, *Goodness and rightness in Thomas Aquinas' Summa Theologiae* (Washington DC: Georgetown UP, 1992); *idem*, 'Ten reasons why Thomas Aquinas is important for ethics today', *New Blackfriars* 75 (1994), pp 354–363; James Weisheipl, *Friar Thomas D'Aquino* (Washington DC: Catholic UP, 1983).

⁷ R. M. Henley, 'Casuistry', James Hastings (ed), *Encyclopedia of religion and ethics* vol 3 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1928), pp 239–247; Albert Jonsen and Stephen Toulmin, *The abuse of casuistry: a history of moral reasoning* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); James Keenan and Thomas Shannon (eds), *The context for casuistry* (Washington DC, Georgetown UP, 1995); Edmund Leites (ed), *Conscience and casuistry in early modern Europe* (New York: Cambridge UP, 1988).

⁸ Besides the important *Making of moral theology*, Mahoney's earlier *Seeking the Spirit* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1981) very powerfully makes this point.

⁹ Thomas Slater, *A manual of moral theology*, 2nd edn, 2 vols (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1908), I, pp 5–6.

¹⁰ Henry Davis, *Moral and pastoral theology* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1941), I, p 4.

¹¹ This is a thesis that I am proving in a project entitled, *Virtues, cases and consciences: the unique achievement of early British Puritan practical divinity*.

¹² Peter Milward, *Religious controversies of the Elizabethan Age: a survey of printed sources* (London: Scolar Press, 1977), pp 73–74; Helen White calls it 'incomparably the most popular book of spiritual guidance in sixteenth-century England', *The Tudor books of saints and martyrs* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1963), p 205.

¹³ Brad Gregory, 'The "true and zealous service of God": Robert Parsons, Edmund Bunny, and *The first booke of the Christian exercise*', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 45 (1994), pp 238–268.

¹⁴ On the achievement of the Puritans see Kevin Kelly, *Conscience: dictator or guide? a study in seventeenth-century English Protestant theology* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967); Henry McAdoo, *The structure of Caroline moral theology* (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1949).

¹⁵ Peter Holmes (ed), *Elizabethan casuistry* (Thetford, Norfolk: Catholic Record Society, 1981).

¹⁶ Louis J. Puhl, *The Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius: a new translation based on studies in the language of the autograph* (Westminster MD: The Newman Press, 1957), Exx 97–98, pp 44–45.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, Exx 234, p 102.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Exx 15, p 6.

¹⁹ John O'Malley, *The first Jesuits* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1993), pp 136–152; on Christian individualism and Jesuit spirituality see Thomas Clancy, *Papist pamphleteers: the Allen-Persons party and the political thought of the Counter-Reformation in England, 1572–1615* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1964), pp 142–158.

²⁰ See *Summa theologiae* I-II, 64.1 and 2.

²¹ Puhl, Exx 53, p 28.

²² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981).

²³ *Summa theologiae* III, 69.3c.

²⁴ See my 'Parenting and the virtue of prudence', *Church* 10.1 (1994), pp 40–42.

²⁵ Simon Harak, *Virtuous passions* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1993).

²⁶ Hugo Rahner, *Ignatius the theologian* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1990).

²⁷ Joseph Kotva, *The Christian case for virtue ethics* (Washington DC: Georgetown UP, 1996).