

## FREEDOM IN A MORALLY DIVERSE WORLD

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Scripture says that the wise person loves one who offers reproof (Prov 9:8). A wise person welcomes correction, even rebuke, because accountability for one's wrongdoing can prod one to make amends and return to the good. Accordingly, both instructing the ignorant and the conversion of sinners count among the Works of Mercy. Scripture also says "stop judging, that you may not be judged" (Mt 7:1, NAB). The Bible includes examples of prophetic denunciation and stories of mercy that subvert or subordinate moral codes by pointing to higher moral obligations of compassion, forgiveness, and radical inclusivity. Jesus' own example includes both the frank, sometimes sharp, identification of sin, and a demonstrated preference for compassion and mercy. These two scriptural passages point to a tension at the heart of Christian moral theology. Charity and justice require us to form our own consciences, to practice fraternal correction, and to denounce injustice as an aspect of being in solidarity with victims. Charity and justice also require us to forbear the faults of others (also a Work of Mercy); to acknowledge factors that mitigate or remove subjective culpability; to subject moral judgments to critical reflection (for example by testing them for consistency and for the taint of bias); to acknowledge that our moral teachings are subject to historical development, imperfect articulation and application, and human fallibility; and to refrain from judgmental, self-righteous, and hypocritical attitudes.

These tensions play out in ecclesial polarizations among Christians and within Catholicism. Consider Catholic debates about the meaning, reception, and consequences of the Second Vatican Council (Vatican II) and divergent responses to the papacy of Pope Francis. Some Catholics, encouraged by the example of Pope Francis, call the church to reimagine many moral and pastoral positions. Others worry that what appears to be a moral laxism inspired by Vatican II and Francis's pontificate poses a threat to the religious reproduction of Catholicism. They believe that changing demographics among Catholics stem from a dilution of Catholic identity and practice. These demographics include declines in the real numbers of self-identified Catholics, and rising numbers among nominal Catholics who rarely or never receive the sacraments and who disagree with church teaching on matters of faith and morals. In such contexts, some traditionalists worry that efforts to welcome and accompany persons whose lives are ostensibly at odds with church teaching will sow confusion or scandal among the faithful. In short, polarization within the Catholic Church reflects tensions between central tropes of Christian faith, as well as disagreement and

uncertainty about how the church (as institution and as a people) should respond to the reality of moral diversity.

By moral diversity I simply mean the fact of divergent and competing moralities, such as differences over the kind of life one claims is worth living, the kind of person it is good to be, and the moral duties and obligations we have. What things are permitted to us? Who is worth emulating? What and who are considered wrong and why? Moral diversity includes not only the fact of moral disagreements but the plurality of ways of life, which our conceptions of goodness too often fail to convey.

Moral diversity involves differences and disagreements that can be distinctively challenging. They can evoke sentiments of anger, indignation, resentment, disgust, fear, and apathy. They can involve experiences of indifference, harm, victimization, and betrayal. Moral differences can call into question our fundamental beliefs and values, our very sense of self and of others. Some moral differences and disagreements may be unimportant, but many of them are painful, confusing, and frustrating. And their impact—direct and collateral—can play out across human domains and generations.

Moral diversity is both a consequence of and an occasion for the exercise of freedom. How should we respond to “moral others?” Instances of moral diversity may involve some overt action of yours upon me, a moral position of yours I find objectionable, or one of us finding fault with the other regarding the kind of person we are becoming or the manner of life we are living. Whatever the case, one’s decision about what to make of instances of moral diversity is always also a decision about one’s own moral commitments and a decision about how to relate to moral others.

Exposure to different ways of life, growing acceptance of behavior previously deemed morally unacceptable, and the sheer complexity of contemporary life can make it difficult to know whether some character trait, action, or facet of social life is morally deficient. Many factors, including shifting cultural norms, social networking, and coarsened social discourse facilitate public pronouncements of moral judgment. It is easy to express outrage without knowing the facts of a situation, or any of the persons involved, to denounce lifestyles different from one’s own, to shore up one’s identity by embracing a normative self-conception that is essentially in opposition to the moral identity one attributes to others. More precisely, though we may suspect something is wrong, it may be hard to give an intelligent and persuasive account as to why it is so. How do we speak about moral failure in ways that serve human flourishing, that are not prey to sanctimony or myopic hubris? How do we fashion lives that resist what is evil, that contribute to the common good, and affirm moral diversity, on the whole, as good?

We cannot fashion a just, peaceful, and humane life together without practices of moral correction and denunciation, but we need to learn to do so in ways that are themselves aligned with the human good, respecting and protecting others’ freedom without ceding all contested questions to subjectivism, and forging effective partnerships to resist grave wrongs and transform unjust social conditions. In short, we need to learn how to exercise our freedom in a world of morally diversity.

Moral diversity is nothing new. But it is particularly challenging in the cultural moment we now face. We have precious few models for navigating it well. All I can really bring to that gap are some observations and some questions, and the hope that if those questions resonate with you, perhaps we can develop some models together. To

that end, I entertain nine observations about human freedom. The first five outline essential features of a Catholic conception of human freedom as well as resources in the Catholic moral tradition that are relevant to the wise exercise of freedom in a morally diverse world. While there is much to appreciate here, these resources are too often deployed in ways that make it more difficult to navigate moral differences and disagreements in a manner consistent with the good news of Jesus Christ, our “small-c” catholicity as church, and the needs of the world in which we find ourselves. The last three claims I make about freedom suggest ways of reorienting Catholic responses to moral diversity.

### 1. FREEDOM AND TRUTH

In Catholic theological anthropology, the person’s ability to make deliberate choices distinguishes them from other creatures. Freedom is therefore an essential component of the human person’s inherent dignity. Through the exercise of their freedom, the person fashions themselves, impacts others and the world around them, and responds to God’s self-offer in grace.

While the import of our choices for our identities and relationships accrues over time, during our earthly lives human freedom remains unfinished. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, there remains “the possibility of choosing between good and evil, and thus of growing in perfection or of failing and sinning. This freedom characterizes properly human acts. It is the basis of praise or blame, merit or reproach.”<sup>1</sup> Freedom is therefore appropriately understood as a power for self-determination through the person’s choices. Note, too, that this conception of freedom as a power to choose between good and evil identifies this capacity as the basis for praise and blame.

Moreover, as the language of growing in perfection or failing in sin suggests, a Catholic conception of human freedom affirms an integral relationship between freedom and an objective moral order which has God as its source and its end. True freedom lies in choices ordered to the good: “The more one does what is good, the freer one becomes. There is no true freedom except in the service of what is good and just. The choice to disobey and do evil is an abuse of freedom and leads to “the slavery of sin.”<sup>2</sup> Similarly, according to *Gaudium et Spes*, the human person cultivates a manner of life consistent with their dignity as they develop a propensity for the spontaneous choice of what is good.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, §1732 (hereafter cited as CCC), [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P5N.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5N.HTM).

<sup>2</sup> CCC, §1733, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P5N.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5N.HTM).

<sup>3</sup> *Gaudium et Spes* (December 7, 1965) § 17, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).

Human freedom, therefore, must be distinguished from what Pope Francis calls “an illusion we are peddled,” which would have us believe that we inhabit a moral reality we are “constructing from zero.”<sup>4</sup>

The problem of moral foundations—whether moral claims are objective, on what grounds, and how we know them—is all the more pressing in an age of “alternative facts” and deep fakes. As Lisa Cahill and others have argued, the Aristotelian-Thomistic tradition affirms our commonality as human persons—our humanity appears in bodily, intellectual, and social capacities and in shared experiences. These will vary across individuals and cultural inflections. Nevertheless, shared experiences of goods and evils, agency and vulnerability, aspiration and failure provide structure for some basic moral understanding and consensus between persons and communities. The inter-relationship among freedom, our shared humanity, and our dignity as persons created in the image of God means that human self-determination through the exercise of freedom unfolds in a world that is already morally significant, rather than a malleable void.

Before turning to the second claim about freedom I want to explore, note that the magisterial sources enlisted here tend to define freedom as a power to choose. They accentuate freedom as a human capacity that is exercised episodically in situations in which an agent has the ability do otherwise. It is important to note that this does not exhaust the meaning of freedom in Catholic theology. Saint Paul and Saint Augustine, of course, highlighted dimensions of freedom as an evaluative orientation, or disorientation, as the case may be. Both grappled with the experience of a divided will, capturing the conflictual loves, the concupiscence, and the experience of internal division or alienation that can mark our moral lives.

When we think of freedom through these experiences, we may still arrive at negative moral appraisals of various behaviors or omissions, but we might also conclude that an agent’s subjective guilt is mitigated, or couple our appraisal with compassion or solidarity. These aspects of Catholic conceptions of freedom play out in some of the observations I entertain next. The point to underscore here, however, is that freedom is a power for self-determination through our choices which we exercise in a context of common humanity, with the makings of a shared moral landscape, but also within diverse ways of life that are evidence of, not a departure from, that common humanity.

## **2. FREEDOM AS PERSONAL AND SOCIAL**

Our freedom is both deeply personal and irreducibly social. As we noted a moment ago, the exercise of our freedom is part of our dignity as human persons created in the image of God. It is from God and finds its end in God. Freedom is essential to our distinctiveness as creatures, and as individuals. No one can exercise our freedom for us. Freedom is both a gift and burden, a capacity we have and who we are in the totality of our lives.

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<sup>4</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), §30, §15, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html).

Because freedom is not so much something one has rather than who one is, and because it is through the exercise of our freedom that each of us says our yes or no to God, the respect we owe to other persons on account of their dignity includes respect for their freedom. Put differently, other persons comprise constraints on one's freedom. We cannot treat them in ways that objectify or instrumentalize them, or that unduly restrict their freedoms. Respecting their freedom does not mean reserving all judgment about their choices or refraining from sanctions. It does mean that one's own freedom is not only integrally related to the truth but also to demands of responsibility toward one's neighbors.

However personal human freedom is, it is also thoroughly social. Human freedom unfolds and operates in a social world that impinges on it for better or worse. Each person's freedom is situated within the specificity of history and culture, and amidst social structures. The social situation of freedom makes some choices available to us and forecloses others, can be hospitable to our aspirations and purposes, or can confront us with tragic choices and morally injurious circumstances. Our social situation can assist our growth in a manner of life consistent with our dignity, or keep us perniciously vulnerable to the hostility, suspicion, and condescension of others.

The sociality of freedom attenuates judgments about responsibility, blame, and praise. And a robust body of scholarship, much of which springs from this academic society, advances our understanding of the impact of social structures on accounts of human agency and for practical deliberation about pressing social issues. Literature from the social sciences also informs our thinking about freedom and responsibility within choice architectures, across generations, and in contexts of global interdependence. Much of this literature raises more questions than we can answer, but it provides sorely needed insights for better understanding our freedom, and correctives to accounts of freedom that continue to over-emphasize episodic choices, and contexts where one has the ability to do otherwise.

These insights certainly give the lie to a picture of freedom as a default state of neutrality exercised only or paradigmatically in neatly demarcated courses of action. Freedom can only meaningfully be exercised within a given context and an array of constraints. Moreover, given our mutual interdependence, the integral connection between my freedom and my flourishing in a life ordered to the good, necessarily includes the use of my freedom in ways that promote that same flourishing for others. Put differently, human freedom is yoked to responsibility to, for, and with others, and this dynamic of freedom and responsibility lies at the heart of freedom's integral relation to an objective moral order.

### **3. FREEDOM, SIN, AND GRACE**

The language of sin seems an unlikely resource to enlist in response to moral diversity, unless one's purpose is to engage in condemnation. Talk of sin can be weaponized against already vulnerable populations and used cruelly. It may be off-putting to religiously unaffiliated persons or exacerbate internal divisions. While it is important to remain cognizant of these challenges, the language of sin is nonetheless a useful resource for reckoning with human agency and the malformation of the world. It can invite one into honest consideration of one's identity as a person forgiven by

God. In doing so, the language of sin can shape Catholic responses to moral diversity from postures of humility, gratitude, compassion, and solidarity.

As we have argued, in and through the exercise of our freedom, we respond to God's invitation to share in the divine life through grace. Sin is therefore fundamentally relational, rather than consisting solely in the choice of discrete actions or objects. Human freedom emerges, and is exercised within sinful dynamics, incorporating our agency into a pervasive disruption of proper relationship with God, self, and others. Sin impacts not only freedom, but also our reason and appetites, effecting a confusion about reality. Sin interferes with our capacity to apprehend, articulate, and apply objective moral knowledge, making it harder to come to valid moral judgements across differences, while also manifesting itself as hypocrisy, excessive and bitter recrimination, and apathy.

Because sin is disruption of proper relationship with God, self, and others, sin effects a confusion that distorts our reason, affections, and will, that is, the very sources of our agency. Accordingly, grace draws us into an alternative economy of relationships, repairing our agency and allowing us to recognize sin as such. Grace is our participation in God's own life, which liberates us from the pathologies of sin and makes genuine freedom possible. This is why a Catholic conception of human freedom affirms that we are only truly free when our choices align with the truth.

Neither sin nor grace obliterate our agency. Within the dynamics of sin and grace we remain responsible for our choices. Indeed, sin and grace explain aspects of freedom that are elided or unintelligible in an account of freedom as autonomy.

Accounts of freedom that emphasize discrete choices we make when we have the ability to have done otherwise can neglect the pervasiveness of sin and elicit responses to others' moral choices that focus more on blame and condemnation than compassion. They can also neglect the operation of grace as our gradual re-formation into new relational possibilities, including ways of being in community with others that subvert some of the very moral distinctions made in ecclesial discourse around sin and morality.

Recognition of freedom's operation within dynamics of sin and grace therefore hinder and help our navigation of a morally diverse world. What kind of persons and communities do we need to become not only to talk about sin and the harm we cause as sinners, but to do so in ways that can be experiences of grace? That build community instead of divide us? That do justice as well as mercy? These questions are crucial for Christian persons and communities endeavoring to navigate a morally diverse world.

#### **4. FREEDOM AND THE LABOR OF CONSCIENCE**

So, the first three observations about freedom we have entertained map out general themes in Catholic conceptions of freedom. Human freedom is a power for self-determination, both deeply personal and deeply social, that emerges and unfolds in salvation history and in its totality comprises the person's response to God's offer of grace. That response is made in and through our relationships with others, with whom we share a basic humanity that attests to objective dimensions of morality and informs moral understanding and practices of moral judgment across our differences. Other persons impinge upon our freedom in better and worse ways. Their inherent value as

free moral agents also determines what it means to grow in freedom. Growth in freedom occurs through conforming ourselves to the good in the new patterns of community that grace makes possible.

Assuming those observations comprise a reasonably familiar portrait of freedom in a Catholic theological perspective, we can pivot to other resources in the Catholic moral tradition which speak to the exercise of freedom in a morally diverse world, starting with conscience.

Catholic conceptions of conscience assume an objective moral order. Like human freedom, conscience finds its proper orientation, efficacy, and end in the truth, which is to say the good. Accordingly, conscience has objective and subjective dimensions. Objectively, conscience is our capacity to distinguish right from wrong, to apprehend good and evil, and to reason ethically, whereas subjectively conscience refers to the totality of the person's response to God in and through her own life.

While conscience is a capacity for judgment about what to do or not to do, it also designates the whole of one's moral life before God and in relation with others. Conscience goes beyond decision-making, including the entirety of one's moral life. Conscience is a lifelong engagement with the circumstances in which one finds oneself, developing and regressing as one exercises their freedom in better or worse ways.

While conscience empowers us to know right from wrong it is fallible and subject to ignorance and malformation. The judgments of conscience can err. Moreover, the sinful dynamics in which our agency emerges means that the partiality, provisionality, and the fallibility of conscience are often hidden from us amidst the social and structural circumstances in which we find ourselves and which can obscure or serve to justify convictions and values that are mistaken or pernicious.

We are therefore obligated to engage in what Elizabeth Sweeny Block calls the labor of conscience.<sup>5</sup> The claim that we must work assiduously to form conscience is certainly not new, but Block argues that the labor of conscience includes sustained reckoning with the malformation that social sin effects. The reformation of conscience requires sustained efforts for critical self-examination, cultivation of ethical reasoning skills, and perspective-taking efforts to understand an issue from others' viewpoints. The labor of conscience is necessary for the navigation of moral diversity.

## 5. FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHERS' CHOICES

We have noted that freedom is not the absence of all responsibility but comes to fruition in it. Moral diversity poses many challenges and opportunities with regard to our responsibility to, with, and for others. Moral diversity may appear altogether threatening, as though being confronted with moral choices, positions, and lives that differ from our own regularly places us in the occasion of sin.

When freedom is understood as the ability to do otherwise, responsibility appears to be similarly individualistic. In such a framework the notion of being held responsible and blameworthy for another person's actions is difficult to parse. However, the

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<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Sweeny Block, "White Privilege and the Erroneous Conscience: Rethinking Moral Culpability and Ignorance," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 39, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2019): 357-374.

Catholic moral tradition provides resources that assist us in understanding these dimensions of responsibility. One such resource is church teaching about cooperation with evil. Catholic tradition distinguishes between formal and material cooperation. Formal cooperation refers to occasions when one person directly enables, permits, or even requires another's wrongdoing. Material cooperation refers to ways one may assist another's wrongdoing. These forms of cooperation can be more or less proximate, direct and indirect. Degrees of culpability would be assessed accordingly. The point is that Catholic teaching about cooperation with evil draws our attention to consideration of the ways we may facilitate others' sin and find ourselves implicated in sinful dynamics and systems we did not create and have limited or power to affect. Concerns about cooperation with evil are important and useful in reckoning with our own or others' responsibility, and in deliberation about personal responsibility in relation to systems and institutions. It can also warrant ecclesial strategies of disengagement and condemnation when the work of accompaniment and the practice of compassion and courage would demand more from us.

Catholic teaching about scandal underscores the earlier observation that responsibility toward others morally constrains the exercise of freedom. St. Paul states in his letter to the Romans, even when something may be lawful, we may have an overriding moral obligation to curtail or forego that freedom for the sake of our neighbors. Catholic teaching about scandal develops this insight.

In Catholic teaching about scandal, scandal refers to "an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil."<sup>6</sup> The crux of scandal is not really about another's emotive reaction to my scandalous attitude or behavior, whether that reaction consist in indignation, outrage, titillation, disgust, or other negative emotions. Scandal is about the impact I have in terms of influencing my neighbor to sin. Importantly, I can cause scandal through my overt actions, through my attitudes, and even by failing to act. As the Catholic sex abuse crisis made abundantly clear, institutions and cultures can cause scandal as well.

Catholic teaching regarding cooperation with evil and scandal are valuable resources that bring badly needed nuance to understanding the bounds of moral responsibility, human solidarity in sin, and the meaning of freedom in a tradition that treats human sociality with deep seriousness. These teachings link freedom to responsibility for others, and in doing so push us to consider with fresh eyes what it means to love our neighbors and what responsibilities we have to cultivate the common good. Nevertheless, concerns about cooperation and scandal are sometimes invoked in ways that truncate our responses to moral diversity and complexity. In doing so we can stop short of examining blind spots, bias, institutional shortcomings, and social dynamics that inhibit us from growing further in grace. We can deploy concerns about scandal and cooperation selectively to serve our own agendas. We can hide behind them rather than do the hard work of formation and accompaniment.

We would do well to ask whether Catholic teaching about cooperation and scandal are adequate for navigating a morally diverse world. We need additional resources that serve moral reflection on aspects of living in community, such as tools for thinking about the ethics of compromise, selective cooperation with partners on issues where we are able to agree, what respect for others' conscience means operationally in our

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<sup>6</sup> CCC, §2284, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/\\_P5N.HTM](https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P5N.HTM).



social and organizational relations, prioritization of moral commitments in cases of conflict, and so forth. In short, must concerns over cooperation or scandal always override other values or relational choices?

## **6. THE FREEDOM OF BEING WRONG**

Catholic teaching about cooperation and scandal brings rich and enduring insights to bear on personal and communal moral deliberation and decision-making. They comprise tools that can assist us in responding to situations in which we confront moral differences and disagreement.

However, these tools are insufficient for the challenges and opportunities posed by moral diversity. To my mind they are both under-leveraged and overused. They are under-leveraged insofar as they prompt practical moral reasoning about situations at hand, activating conscience and equipping individual and communal decision-makers with useful moral distinctions. Over-used because they tend to dominate institutional ecclesial responses to moral diversity and foreclose opportunities for formation. Consider a Catholic school's decision to dismiss an unmarried teacher who becomes pregnant. The concern is that retaining the teacher might confuse others regarding the church's teaching on marriage and sexuality and comprise a source of scandal, though it seems quite possible that others would be scandalized by the decision to dismiss an expectant mother. It's important to note that the choice of whether to dismiss or retain the teacher is itself a moral decision about how to prioritize values as well as a developmental opportunity for the community to grow in grace.

With that in mind, the sixth observation about freedom I will share is that there is a freedom that comes with being wrong, or risking being thought wrong. Catholic teaching about cooperation with evil and scandal tend to privilege protective stances in the face of moral diversity, prioritizing the appearance of moral clarity and consistency, and foregoing opportunities to work through new ways of being in community and new depths of conscience formation. To be clear, we should avoid evil, and we should refrain from inducing others to sin. But we are all already sinners. And our hands are already dirty. How might we respond to the challenges and opportunities that moral diversity entails were we to decenter strategies built around preserving our liberty in a world we characterize as hostile to our moral commitments, or allowing fear of confusion to take precedence over the difficult and messy work of formation?

The freedom that can be found in being wrong is the freedom to relinquish the anxious maintenance of a goodness that is already something of a mirage. Being wrong—whether that means being mistaken, being judged at fault even when one is not, or being fully culpable for some moral failure—does not automatically or inevitably bring about such freedoms. Rather, reckoning honestly with moral failure is an experience of grace.

Rather than punt in the face of moral diversity, we ought to be asking ourselves how we can better equip ourselves and others to face it well. That effort is the labor of conscience. It is work that needs to transpire individually and communally.

## 7. FREEDOM AND THE PRACTICE OF ETHICAL REASONING

The labor of conscience is indeed work we are obliged to take up in earnest and over our lifetimes. Moral diversity encompasses different kinds of disagreements, deliberations about normative commitments and practical dilemmas, decisions about how to respond to others' actions and behaviors when these are contrary to one's own commitments, and choices about what values to prioritize, when, and why. We are called to approach this work with care, compassion, curiosity, and courage. Recent scholarship on the ethics of the church and on university ethics is encouraged.<sup>7</sup> But as a church and as educators we can do better.

In parishes and in church-affiliated organizations, especially colleges and universities, we should focus more intentionally on the practice of ethical reasoning than is often the case. We should approach ethics education in ways that assist students in the moral appraisal of specific differences and disagreements, the evaluation of salient circumstances that might shift that appraisal or mitigate culpability, distinguishing diversity that appears within a range of morally appropriate choices from moral actions which are well-intentioned but misguided, and these from moral actions which are wrong full stop. We should equip others with the questions, tools, and patterns of ethical reasoning necessary to critical examination of moral claims and for grappling with substantive claims about reality.

We can make our work on curricula and pedagogies more visible. We can craft courses that focus very intentionally on teaching students how to reason ethically. We can advance scholarship on these issues, including scholarship on teaching and learning, and continue to share practices from communities and disciplines that do it well. We can continue to shape reflection in our parishes about the kind of leadership we want and the kind of community we want to become. We can practice accompaniment and inclusion, and balancing charity and justice, and we can fail, and we can try again.

I suspect that one reason why concerns about scandal often arise in response to moral diversity is that we have not done the work of building a culture that can tolerate nuance, and we have not formed leaders who can guide such change. Put differently, we remain very much in need of re-formation in grace, allowing ourselves to be drawn into the new relational possibilities and ways of being community that grace effects.

## 8. FREEDOM, FORBEARANCE, AND FORTITUDE

A number of recent publications in Catholic ethics and Christian ethics more generally focus on disagreements, democracy, and finding common ground. They do not use the language of moral diversity or emphasize the need to cultivate ethical reasoning skills, but these volumes do examine virtues, political rhetoric, ecclesiologies, and particular social issues with a view to supporting more constructive and more faithful communities and enabling better cooperation to address social problems.

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<sup>7</sup> James F. Keenan, *University Ethics: How Colleges Can Build and Benefit From a Culture of Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015).

Two virtues that are particularly important for exercising freedom well in a morally diverse world are forbearance and fortitude.

James Calvin Davis argues that “in the exercise of forbearance, we insist on the maintenance of community even with those we perceive to be in error.”<sup>8</sup> Through forbearance we “may not only improve the health of our common life together as church; we may also seize a chance to witness to the world an alternative way to navigate difference, by demonstrating the power potential in forbearance as a set of ‘transferrable skill that our political culture desperately needs.’”<sup>9</sup> In the face of moral diversity, we must cultivate forbearance.

Forbearance differs from tolerance or being non-judgmental. As the philosopher Gary Watson asks, “What would ‘never judging’ or ‘accepting people exactly as they are’...come to, and why would these stances be at all desirable? If ‘never to judge’ means suspending our critical intelligence or not holding one another morally answerable, then nonjudgmentalism writ large amounts to nihilism, complacency, or a loss of moral nerve.”<sup>10</sup>

Watson argues that standing in judgment can go wrong through “failures of interpretive generosity (roughly, too readily attributing fault in the first place)” and “being too unaccepting of others’ faults.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, moral appraisal is necessary work. Confronted with non-trivial instances of moral diversity we might consider teasing apart the need for moral appraisal and the freedom we have to choose how to regard the other, respond to the moral issue at hand, and how to relate with them going forward. Making these distinctions and discerning how to live them out in practice is not easy to do, for individuals and much less for communities. The virtue of forbearance prioritizes efforts to maintain community while holding ourselves and others accountable.

Must we practice forbearance with everyone you may well ask? What about abusers? What about those who deny the humanity and equality of others? Forbearance is not a blank check, nor is the practice of forbearance undifferentiated across a community. There may well be instances where a community practices forbearance on behalf of a member who cannot reasonably be asked to do so given specific circumstances, or instances when an individual member finds a way to offer forbearance on behalf of the community as a whole. Examples that come to mind include the forgiveness practiced by members of the Nickel Mines Amish community following the 2006 school shooting, or Helen Prejean serving as a spiritual advisor to convicted murderers on death row.

In the face of moral diversity, we must also cultivate fortitude. Fortitude is required to stand by our values and convictions when doing so becomes costly, say, because our position is unpopular or when we are speaking truth to power. Fortitude is required to admit we may be mistaken, that our convictions may be motivated by self-interest or

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<sup>8</sup> James Calvin Davis, *Forbearance: A Theological Ethic for a Disagreeable Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2017), 19.

<sup>9</sup> Davis, *Forbearance*, 195.

<sup>10</sup> Gary Watson, “Standing in Judgment,” in *Blame: Its Nature and Norms*, eds. D. Justin Coates and Neal A. Tognazzini (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 283.

<sup>11</sup> Watson, “Standing in Judgment,” 284.

bias, that having the “courage of our convictions” can be window dressing for blind spots, condescension, the maintenance of our own power or privilege. Fortitude is required for honesty about our own moral failures. Finally, fortitude is required to persist in the unresolved tensions that come with forbearance and accompaniment of others. We need it to be steadfast in forbearing while others clamor for more punitive responses, and fault us for hypocrisy or moral compromise.

## 9. FREEDOM IN COMMUNITY

While forbearance and fortitude need to be practiced by individuals, and are particularly crucial traits for anyone entrusted with the care of a community or organization, forbearance and fortitude also depend significantly on communities and serve communities. In *Fratelli Tutti* Pope Francis argues that “Fraternity is born not only of a climate of respect for individual liberties, or even of a certain administratively guaranteed equality. Fraternity necessarily calls for something greater, which in turn enhances freedom and equality.”<sup>12</sup> Fraternity is a work of grace and is built through daily commitments to foster and sustain a set of virtues and practices. In this regard fraternity is an effect of freedom and a condition for the fullness of freedom in community.

Unfortunately, intra-Catholic polarization poses an ongoing challenge. Charles Camosy notes that “our identity is often defined not primarily in positive terms but rather in opposition to fellow Catholics.”<sup>13</sup> Moral diversity raises profound questions for living together. Even communities that are deeply committed to valuing diversity, inclusion, and respect for others must determine how to respond to violations of community norms, whether and how to sanction offenders, what differences to tolerate and celebrate. On each of these points there will be disagreements. And more insidiously there will be—for many of us—an attachment to our differences that make it difficult to be open to the work grace could accomplish in us.

According to Pope Francis, the way to distinguish apparent virtue from authentic virtue is to identify whether it fosters openness and union with others.<sup>14</sup> Hence we return to an observation about freedom that began this paper, namely, that we respond to God’s offer of grace through the exercise of our freedom as we respond to other free agents in ways that approach or fall short of the good. A criterion for evaluating the exercise of our freedom is whether it fosters openness to others and union with them. Neither openness nor union requires a false neutrality or moral subjectivism, but it does require us to bring sufficient nuance to ethical reasoning so that we can distinguish moral appraisal of another’s actions from the choice to maintain community.

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<sup>12</sup> Francis, *Fratelli Tutti* (October 3, 2020), §103 [http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20201003\\_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_enciclica-fratelli-tutti.html) (hereafter cited as *FT*).

<sup>13</sup> Charles Camosy, *One Church: How to Rekindle Trust, Negotiate Difference, and Reclaim Catholic Unity* (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 2022), 5.

<sup>14</sup> *FT*, §91.

## CONCLUSION

Moral diversity raises *foundational* questions about grounds for moral judgments/truth claims; *epistemological* questions about how we validate these claims, limitations to that knowledge, and the import of those limitations for responsibility and culpability; and *practical* questions about forming conscience, navigating disagreements and differences, and responding to wrongdoing (our own and others'). All of this is complicated by high degrees of polarization and partisanship that make patience, humility, and accompaniment harder to practice.

But what is a plenary address for if not to plant seeds in hope for an eventual harvest? In ways big and small each of us is free to consider how we can nurture respect for others' freedom and conscience, moral judgments made with thoughtfulness and humility, and practices of accompaniment and inclusion, justice and mercy.