

THE SCIENTIFIC TEACHING OF MORAL THEOLOGY

THE scientific teaching of moral theology means teaching moral theology as a science. It can hardly be understood to mean a consideration of pedagogical principles involved, or of modern techniques developed by modern educators with regard to methods. It is rather a question of purpose. Is our teaching of moral theology to be directed toward the formation and extension of the *habitus scientiae moralis*, or has it merely the more practical purpose of preparing our seminarians for the work of hearing confessions? If the latter is the case, there seems to be no question of scientific teaching. It is conceivable that a young man could learn a great deal about moral theology, perhaps even enough for effective administration of the Sacrament of Penance, without being a Theologian at all.

Unfortunately, moral theology, as it is understood today and even as it is taught, could be defined as a science of sin, because sin forms almost its entire subject matter. We are inclined to put the emphasis on the evil that men do and give too little attention to the good works he performs or at least is capable of performing.

Moral Theology, in contradistinction to dogmatic theology, is considered almost entirely as a practical science. Anything of a speculative or scientific nature is conceived as belonging to the province of Dogma. Moral, on the contrary, is concerned with practical problems, and practical problems, in the estimation of many, mean sins. Moral thus gradually loses its character both as a science and as theology. While it is true that moral theology *ex professo* treats of human activity in so far as it is a means to man's supernatural destiny and is thus distinguished from ethics which treats merely of the natural order, this distinction is not always evident in practice, for nearly all the factors that make human activity supernatural are treated in Dogma. A good course in ethics is frequently looked upon as a sufficient reason for omitting or at least treating in a superficial and hasty manner certain subjects, which materially speaking are common to both Moral Theology and Ethics. It is no wonder that

in the minds of many there is a great deal of confusion between the natural and supernatural orders. Again there is admittedly a difference between moral theology and ethics in the *objectum formale* (*quo*), but this difference in practice is at times overlooked. As in ethics so in moral theology reason seems to be the important medium. Sacred Scripture and Tradition, if they are used at all, seemingly are considered merely confirmatory of what reason has already demonstrated.

In the teaching of moral theology, the practical is not the only aspect. Like Dogma, Moral is also speculative and scientific. There is good reason for saying that a thorough knowledge of Dogma requires what may be called a speculative mind. But there is no more speculation involved in the tract "De Homine" for instance, which is conceded to belong to the field of Dogmatic Theology, than there is in the treatise on human acts, which obviously belongs to Moral Theology. A knowledge of metaphysics is necessary for both. For Saint Thomas there was not a great deal of difference. He treated Moral and Dogma in the same way. The *Pars Secunda* even in its external form is similar to the *Pars Prima* and the *Pars Tertia*.

In the last few years there has been a return to the doctrine and method of Saint Thomas, which however has been more noticeable in the teaching of Dogmatic Theology than of Moral Theology. Apropos of this we might quote the words of Merkelbach, "Reditus ad doctrinam et methodum Sancti Thomae, qui fructus tam salutare habuit in metaphysica et dogmatica non eodem gradu se extendit ad Theologiam Moralem propter nocivum persistens divortium inter theologiam speculativam et practicam."

The material object of moral theology is human acts, the means by which man is to work out his eternal destiny. These acts are evidently either good in so far as they promote the achievement of man's ultimate end, or evil in so far as they impede it or lead man astray. The method of treatment today, because of practical considerations, is to confine operations to the evil entirely, and leave the good either to Dogma or to Ascetical Theology. This puts Moral Theology in a rather bad light, and moral theologians in an inferior category, but what is more important, it is not the most practical approach. Not much space, in modern manuals of Moral Theology,

is devoted to good acts or to supernatural or meritorious acts. Even some of the questions that are considered arise from a mistaken notion of morality. Such questions, for instance, as indifferent acts, or the reference of man's activity to his ultimate end, are discussed at length. Yet in the proper speculative scientific approach to moral theology, they would not be problems at all. The virtues are considered as a sort of appendix to Moral Theology rather than its essential framework. The tract on Grace is put into Dogma, because the speculative aspect of this subject is inescapable. Moral, in its treatment of virtues, is restricted to the virtues only in so far as they are necessary to salvation. Other considerations are conceived as belonging to the Science of Ascetics. One might ask if this is the proper and practical approach, why are there such long discussions of venial sin? After all, absolutely speaking, one can attain his destiny in spite of venial sin.

Consideration of the good in human acts belongs to Moral Theology just as the consideration of sin. We need a more positive approach. Practically speaking, we are doing a fair job of preparing our priests so far as their office as judge is concerned. Can we say the same thing so far as his offices as teacher and physician are concerned? Would not the return of ascetics to its proper place in moral theology be very beneficial so far as the practical work of the ministry is concerned?

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Digest of Discussion

In the discussion which followed, there was general agreement on the need for a more positive approach to the teaching of moral theology. In fact, it was indicated that some steps have already been taken to give the speculative, scientific as well as the ascetical side of moral theology its proper place in the classroom.

It was suggested that considerable advantage would accrue if questions of special moral were treated before the tract on principles.

That there are some advantages can scarcely be denied, but it was the opinion of some that it is the less scientific method.

The question of visual aids was also brought up and was received with approval in some quarters.

The need for a better knowledge of medical questions, especially on the part of teachers of moral theology was pointed out. The advantages of such organizations as Alcoholics Anonymous were discussed.