

DOES MORALITY NEED THE CHURCH?

Because of the tentative character of this paper I wish to express myself in a more personal way than is customary at theological conventions. I do not find this paper easy to write, the reason for this being that the two abiding convictions I have in regard to the topic seem to be contradictory. On the one hand, I have come to the conclusion that the Church's official moral teaching is wholly inadequate and on the other I am convinced that Christian morality is in need of a teaching Church. In the following remarks I wish to present a brief analysis of these two positions, attempt to reconcile them, and in the course of this possibly gain some insight into the Church as teacher of morality.

PRESENT MORAL TEACHING INADEQUATE

The Church's official moral teaching, as I understand it, is still based on the view of man, generally accepted by Catholics over the last centuries, namely the brilliant synthesis of classical anthropology and Christian ideals that was worked out in the Middle Ages. Here man is a substance, he is essentially finished at the first moment of his being, he has a definable and, in this sense, a static nature. In this view it is possible to derive from man's definable nature principles and laws which determine his moral life. Morality is man's fidelity to his own nature. Since *agere sequitur esse*, man's being is the norm for his moral life.

This anthropology is, I think, no longer accepted in the present century. The secular culture to which we belong came to a more dynamic view of man already in the last century, at least in many of its influential thinkers; the Christian community, by contrast, in dialogue with the scriptures as well as with the world, has adopted a more dynamic view of man only during the last decades. In the Catholic Church the last few years have been crucial in this regard. Vatican Council II has produced a new self-understanding among Catholics and brought them to a more dynamic view of man. In one document, *The Church In The Modern World*, the Council presented

an historically-oriented anthropology. More important was the change produced by the Council in the self-experience of Catholics. Catholics underwent a change, and the reflection on their own lives led them to a more dynamic view of man. Man comes to be through his history.

It is commonly accepted today that man comes to be through a process in which he himself exercises some personal responsibility, in which the whole community is in some way involved, and—according to the Christian faith—in which God is redemptively present to him. While *agere sequitur esse* may often be true of human life, there are important moments, pivotal points in personal history, when it is not true: certain acts or decisions on the part of man reorientate his life in such a crucial way that they become constitutive of who he is and will be. Here the *agere* does not follow, but creates the *esse*. Because of this recognition of the historical character of man it has become impossible to think of man as a substance, as essentially finished at the first moment of his being, and as possessing a fixed, definable nature which is the norm for his behavior.

The man-made, historical character of the human world to which we belong has deeply impressed itself on our consciousness today. We realize that man is born in an unfinished way, even biologically. Even his impulses are still largely undetermined when he leaves his mother's womb. He could not survive without the help of others. It is only through interaction with his human world, especially his family or its substitutes, that the baby gradually becomes capable of life, even physiologically, and eventually learns to speak and acquire consciousness. We have become conscious in the 20th century that the aspects of ourselves which we once tended to regard as most personal, such as our thoughts and feelings, are now to a considerable extent seen as social creations. We constitute ourselves in conversation with others. Man comes to be through a process of dialogue and participation involving first the family, those whom G. E. Mead called "the significant others," and eventually the whole community in whose culture and institutions we are socialized. A point is reached in this process, we hasten to add, where man is able to respond to his environment and in turn recreate the society in which he lives.

This man-made character of the human world destroys—or so it

would seem—the concept of a definable human nature as the abiding norm of man's moral life. Where, then, do we find the norms of human morality? Morality, in this perspective, is man's fidelity to the process by which he comes to be himself. But do we know anything about this process? Is this different in every single culture or is there an abiding orientation in the multiplicity of cultural forms? It is my view that in Jesus Christ, God has revealed the destiny of the entire human race. Christians have been told the orientation of man's self-making. The Church as the fellowship of the redeemed is the revealed image of what, thanks to divine grace, the human race is moving toward. Thanks to God's presence to man's making of man, I propose, mankind is oriented towards growth and reconciliation. By *growth* I mean the widening area of man's responsibility for himself, which includes greater personal unity, and by *reconciliation* I mean the creation of a fellowship in which all are allowed and encouraged to grow. If this is the correct theological analysis of man's dynamic, historical self-understanding, then the moral norm for his actions is their faithful orientation to personal growth and social reconciliation.

I do not have the space to develop this thesis in detail. The only reason why I mention it here is to explain my conviction that the Church's official teaching on morality is wholly inadequate. It is based on an anthropology which is no longer ours. It is my view that man's self-understanding has changed, in the present culture and in the Church, and that since morality is always a function of man's self-understanding, morality, too, has undergone a remarkable transformation. The above observation about growth and reconciliation may not be a definitive and exhaustive statement, but it does summarize what vast numbers of people in our culture, including many Christians, think about the meaning of life and the norm of moral conduct. When they make decisions, when they evaluate their life's orientation, when they try to judge the way in which other people act, they ask whether the manner of life or the acts that constitute it contribute to personal growth rather than regression or compulsion and, *inseparably*, whether they promote fellowship rather than lasting hostility, oppression, or separation. This is the double pole through which vast numbers of our contemporaries generate their moral ideals.

The double pole of growth and reconciliation introduces a tension into the conscience of modern man. There is a certain fear that actions conducive to personal growth may neglect or even contravene the wider reconciliation of men, in the personal or political order, or conversely that actions undertaken for the sake of reconciliation, on a smaller or larger scale, may possibly handicap personal maturity and greater self-responsibility. This tension, I think, is characteristic of modern man. It is part of man's moral experience. For this reason no moral theory should, in the attempt to come to neat solutions of concrete problems, disregard or explain away this creative, and at times uncomfortable polarity.

To reveal the size of my dilemma in the Church, I wish to apply the principles laid down above to an area of human action where they produce moral evaluations that are patently at odds with traditional teaching. Let us look at human sexuality. The moral norm for sexual behaviour is, according to the preceding remarks, its orientation to growth and reconciliation. We have come to recognize more clearly that sexuality is not simply a biological aspect of human life but a dimension of man's personality; we have discovered, moreover—thanks to Sigmund Freud—that sexual action is not always and necessarily an expression of love and affection but may also be, and possibly always remains to some extent, an expression of destructive trends, such as domination, possessiveness, anger, or hostility. The moral quest in a man's sexual life, therefore, is to make sexuality as much as possible an instrument of love and affection. The discovery of the destructive drives often attached to sexuality, and probably never wholly detachable from it, makes new demands on sexual morality. The crucial question is not whether a man and woman are married, for even in marriage sex may be destructive and hence sinful; the crucial question is whether sex is an expression of love, honesty, and responsibility or, in negative terms, whether it shuns the exploitation, self-deception, and power drive which so easily corrupt it. While the conditions for such a responsible expression of sexuality are more readily found in married life, they may not always be absent from among single people. The principles I have outlined seem to permit, given effective means of preventing conception, a humanizing sexual activity among the non-married. This is an example of the

embarrassing situation in which I find myself: the moral convictions I hold as a theologian are out of harmony with the Church's official teaching.

MORALITY DEMANDS THE CHURCH

At the same time—and this is almost ironic—I am strongly convinced that Christian morality demands the Church. In the first place we recognize that moral convictions are usually the creation of people who experience life together. The community discerns the values that protect and promote its well-being. Even when these convictions appear to us as highly personal and private, it is likely that their origin is more social than introspection is able to detect. What counts in detecting the genesis of values is not a psychological analysis of individuals but a sociological analysis of their lives. A group of people, bound by common ties, will react to the same conditions of life, reach out together for what is good and true in their situation, and seek to find an expansion of life despite the many threats to their well-being; in this manner they come to experience the values that promote the community and eventually express them in concepts and words. Studies in the sociology of knowledge have shown how deeply embedded moral convictions are in the life of the community and hence how a social component affects even those views and values that seem most spiritual and private.

The Church was the matrix of the Christian life from the beginning. The reaction of the disciples to Jesus Christ created a Christian consciousness that was expressed in a way of life and certain institutions. To discover Christ and to be led by him meant to be introduced to the new Christian consciousness available in the life of the early Church. The most private encounter with the Lord was in this sense mediated through the community.

Let us look at another example. The modern values proper to liberal society, especially the civil liberties we have come to cherish, were first discerned by a group of men, by prophets, who, while not living together in a community, reacted to the common problems of society, suffered under a common burden, were heirs of a common humanistic tradition, saw new possibilities for improved social structures, and anticipated an expansion of man's consciousness. These

men created a tradition; and those who later came to love the liberties of modern society and were ready to struggle for them, had acquired their moral conviction from this tradition. Since we participate in the consciousness of a group or culture without necessarily being fully aware of this, we may have the impression that the discovery of a value is due to our own private adventure in the realm of truth, while this apparently wholly private adventure is in fact just the manner in which we learn to participate in a wider spiritual tradition. It is worth mentioning in this context that even Christians began to share in the liberal tradition in the last century: they tested it with the Gospel, they discerned its power to humanize society and at the same time saw its limitations, they were witnesses of the official Church's rejection of this tradition (cf. *The Syllabus of Errors*), and eventually—after many decades—achieved the slow assimilation of these values and their Christian expansion in the Catholic Church.

Whatever sets of values we may study, we must conclude that morality needs community and, consequently, that Christian morality needs the Christian community. To become a Christian means to enter the Christian Church, and to lead a Christian life means to participate in the truths and convictions held by the Christian community, either the entire Church or a movement or tradition within it.

These remarks lead us to the consideration of religion as the source of morality and culture in human society. There is today a great emphasis on the highly personal in religion, on man's quest for authenticity, on the inimitable and possibly incommunicable way of man's self-realization. The impatience of many Christians with the institutional Church often leads to a stress on the purely private in religion; and this may well be necessary at certain times. But this stress should not make us overlook the social function and culture-producing role which religion has had and is still having. Religion creates a new consciousness in man and hence is able to transform and constitute society.

Since man is a meaning-defining animal, since the culture in which he lives and comes to be and the institutions which serve him are dependent on the meaning he assigns to his life and his actions, the creation of a special consciousness by the great religions is not just a

way of personal salvation or private worship, but a powerful factor in the transformation and later the maintenance of society.

The entire sociological tradition of the 19th and early 20th centuries (with the exception of Marx and his followers) looked upon the category of the sacred as a society-building factor, without which it was impossible to understand the socio-cultural process. Robert Nisbet's book *The Sociological Tradition* gives a useful presentation of what this category meant to the sociologists. Even though these scholars were for the most part agnostics and anticlerical, they demonstrated that the meaning which people assigned to their lives and hence the kind of culture they produce is either directly created by, or at least in some sense derived from, the ultimate convictions about human destiny as proclaimed by religion. As an illustration we recall the famous thesis of Max Weber that the central intentionality responsible for the modern world—the world constituted by democratic, scientific, technological, and other rationalizing trends—is the inner-worldly asceticism characteristic of a form of Calvinistic Christianity. Whether this particular theory is correct or in need of some modification, it in no way touches the validity of Weber's central theme, verified by his extensive research in the world religions, that religion was a powerful factor in the creation of consciousness and in this manner was always the source of man's sociocultural life. While Weber did not neglect the other factors which enter into the creation of consciousness—the *Realfaktoren* of later sociologists, including the economic and political, he demonstrated the crucial importance of the spiritual factor—the *Idealfaktor*—namely the intentionality created by religion.

What conclusion do I draw from these remarks? It seems to me that if religion simply dealt with the highly personal question of salvation, of inner life, of contemplation, there would be no need for what today is often called organized religion. Then the do-it-yourself religion for which so many people have opted today would be quite adequate. But religion has first of all a vast social function in the building of the human community. Organized religion, I hold, is so important because it influences groups of men, and through them may be able to affect the wider community and thus contribute to the transformation of society. It is here that I see the primary mission of

the Church. While we are ready to admit today that divine grace is offered to every man in his personal history and that therefore, the interpretation of this personal history in faith gives rise to a certain amount of do-it-yourself religion, this need not invalidate an organized Christian movement, a universal Church, which proclaims and celebrates a divine vision of man (in which much room is left for various personal self-interpretations), influences man's self-understanding and thus becomes a crucial factor in the humanization of culture. For the sake of this wider social role of religion, as I see it, there is a need of a teaching Church which is able to communicate the insights granted to the sensitive and wise to the wider social order, the vast movement, the world community. Christian morality, I conclude, is in need of the Church not only because the Church is the community where Christian values may be discovered and appropriated; it is in need of a teaching Church, or magisterium, which communicates these values to the vast numbers of people, thus creating an intentionality which may eventually transform human life and humanize man's history on this globe.

These remarks on institutional religion and the magisterium are largely based on Max Weber's analysis of the change of consciousness in any society. This transformation is always due to a special dialectic between the few and the many. There are first of all the few charismatic leaders who discern the changed situation in which men live, who analyse the ills from which people suffer, who are able to provide some answers to these common problems, and who may possibly even offer a redefinition of man that will enable him to meet the challenges of life more effectively. These charismatic leaders find followers and constitute a movement. But as this movement reaches out to more people and as the original prophets are removed by death or other causes, it becomes necessary to institutionalize the new message. The passage from the few to the many is possible only through an institutionalization of the charisma, even if in this process some of the original vitality of the message is inevitably lost. This loss is the price to be paid for becoming a vast movement.

Applying these general observations to the Christian Church we may think, first of all, of its own genesis. Here we observe the original charismatic leaders, Jesus and his apostles, then the formation of a

movement; as this movement assumed vaster proportions there took place the institutionalization of the message. While the Church at the very beginning was a community of friends, the size of the movement as well as the absence of the charismatically gifted apostles increased the institutional elements in the Church. While this undoubtedly weakened the original vitality, it was nonetheless the only way to become a world movement. In order to create a common consciousness in such a large community of men a teaching became necessary, which was then sought in the scriptures that all accepted and in the consensus of the churches.

I also wish to apply these principles to the contemporary situation of the Church—and by doing so attempt to resolve the apparent contradiction between my disagreement with the Church's official teaching and by stress on the need for a magisterium. It is the opinion of a growing number of theologians that whenever the Church enters a new cultural environment, it must rethink its message in this new spiritual context. In this new environment the Church cannot preserve the self-identity of the Gospel simply by repeating the traditional creed: what is required is the reformulation of the Gospel once for all delivered to the saints. The crucial starting point in this process is the Church's experience of Christ. By this I mean the ordinary Christian experience, granted to men who are sensitive, critical and reflective, men who are part of the new culture and yet seek fidelity to the Gospel. Among these few a new focal point of the Gospel is discerned, in the light of which the traditional teaching may be reinterpreted. It is again my opinion, expressed in writing several times, that at present the Church is in this very situation. A growing number of Christians, not only intellectuals or theologians, but ordinary men and women involved in the construction of the contemporary world, are experiencing the meaning and call of Christ in a new way. The new focus is here, as I indicated at the beginning of this paper, man's self-understanding as an historical being, in whose history God is present. This "new" anthropology, first formulated by a few prophetic theologians over the last hundred years, spread among wide circles through a new spiritual experience, and through the interpretation of this experience provided by these theologians, until significant elements of this anthropology influenced the writing of

the documents of Vatican II. As of now, the Church's teaching authority has not yet wholly endorsed the new view. We find the Catholic Church divided between two different views of man; but even though the Church's official teaching has not yet changed, it is my opinion that eventually—and who knows how long this will take—the official Church will adopt the understanding of the Christian message that has emerged in the dialogue with the modern world, first carried on by the few and then by the greater number. For the unity of the Church and especially for the creation of a common consciousness and hence an effective influence on the transformation of society, what is now required is the cooperation of the Church's magisterium. If Christian morality is to influence the course of history, it is in need of the institutional Church.

HOW DOES THE CHURCH TEACH MORALITY?

How does the Church teach morality? The Church's teaching office has been exercised in a variety of ways through the centuries. At first the teaching took place through the creation of intimate communities in which Christians shared a common life. The communication of values took place in the vital way characteristic of family life. Soon the magisterium was exercised through the celebration of worship and the reading of the scriptures. In later centuries to be a Christian meant to belong to a vast, multi-leveled hierarchical society which communicated a complete, highly structured worldview, putting man securely into an ordered cosmos. While the Church always taught through a complex process involving many social elements, the tendency of the official theology was to adopt a highly intellectualist understanding of the magisterium. The Church's moral teaching was simply her official doctrine about the moral life.

Let us admit that this highly intellectualistic understanding of teaching has dominated the theology of the magisterium. Yet every person involved in teaching knows very well that uttering of categorical remarks about an aspect of reality is not teaching at all. Thus, the highly conceptual understanding of magisterium enabled the bishop to call himself the principal teacher in the diocese, though one may well ask the question when, where and whom the bishops actually teach. Yet while it is easy to be critical of the theological

tradition regarding the magisterium, no one at this time has much new wisdom on the subject. I know of no sociological study—though they probably exist—on how in fact societies are being taught, how in fact the values by which people live are communicated to others and handed on to the next generation. As we search for a more realistic approach to the best way of teaching, we might find that the truths and values in fact being communicated in the Church are possibly not those expressed in her official documents.

Let me make two remarks about the Church as teacher of morality. First, the Church teaches morality through the institutional life in which she involves Christians. The social process in which we take part has a profound effect on the kind of person we come to be, on our attitudes and values, on our vision of the good life. This is a basic principle of sociology. Instead of presenting a theoretical justification of this principle, I simply point to experiences which are common to us. If a man grows up in a highly authoritarian institution where all significant truth is handed down from above, he will tend to become the sort of man who likes a fixed order of life, who cherishes obedience as a principal virtue, and who is made slightly uncomfortable by social change and by critical attitudes that question the institution. If, on the contrary, a man is brought up in a society in which his participation in policy making is an essential part of the institutional process, he will become a different sort of person. He will tend to regard truth as insight, in the prior possession of none, that may be discovered through the conversation and cooperation of many. Since the religious community, whether it be parish, chapel, prayer circle or youth group, is for many people an important experience of institutional life already at an early age, it often communicates moral values in a forceful and abiding way. In particular, I would add, that the orientation towards growth and reconciliation, which I have presented as the divinely-established moral norm of human action, cannot be communicated through words and concepts: what is required in moral teaching is the participation in institutional life which acknowledges and promotes the growth and reconciliation of people. To be taught the new Christian self-understanding, people must enter a process in which they experience themselves as growing and developing, through dialogue with others, through listening to

the divine Word, and through their own responsible choices. The Church, we conclude, is moral magisterium first of all through her institutional life.

This view is not foreign to the theological tradition. We have often insisted that liturgical worship teaches people what church is, precisely by permitting them to participate in it. At worship people learn, not conceptually but by participation, that church is a community of worshippers, that it is an hierarchical community and that at the same time each member has an active part to play, that it is nourished by the Word of God and the eucharist, by divine gifts, of which the hierarchy is as much in need as the rest of the community. Alas, this may not always be the manner in which worship is experienced by the Christian people. As we reflect on this teaching by participation, we must consider the possibility that the morality the Catholic Church in her various branches in fact communicates to people, may not correspond to her so-called official doctrine.

How does the Church teach morality through her institutional life? I do not have the knowledge, at this time, to offer a systematic analysis of institutional life in terms of its effects on man's moral consciousness. A study of this kind would be of great importance. What I wish to do is to refer to three closely related elements of societal life which have a profound influence on the moral formation of people. I tentatively call them policy, priorities, and action.

By policy I mean the manner in which the Church organizes herself internally. This inner organization embodies important values, it reflects how highly the Church values people and how much or how little it intends to submit the well-being of people to the advantage of institutions, for example. It is my opinion that papal encyclicals on social justice do not in fact teach a great deal of morality, while an attempt by the Vatican to render an account of its property and to invest its capital at a low interest rate in the underdeveloped countries would communicate social concern much more effectively. If the Church as an organization on every level, international and local, drew people into responsible thinking about its own operation it would communicate social values even if the various bodies should not always live up to the highest ideal. Teaching takes place not by

example as such but by entry into the process of reflection, planning, and policy-making that could lead to exemplary behaviour.

By priorities I mean the hierarchy of values which the Church communicates through her institutional decisions. These priorities teach people what is really important. The focal point of the moral life cannot be shared by talking about it: it must be part of the social process that creates the community. It is easy to proclaim, for instance, the brotherhood of man, but the official attitude toward intercommunion reveals how much priority the Church in fact assigns to this brotherhood. According to the official position, a Catholic may receive communion in a Catholic parish that has adopted a racist position by rejecting the desegregation program of the diocese, while he may not receive communion with non-Catholic Christians who agree with him about brotherhood but who happen to differ on some institutional element, such as a defined doctrine or the jurisdiction of the pope. Through her law on intercommunion the Church teaches what really counts for her. The present position teaches that the institutional values have priority over the values of love and communion. I find this regrettable.

By action I mean the Church's involvement with other groups of people. Here again it is the action itself, not words and promises, which creates moral consciousness in people. For instance, the involvement of a Catholic organization in the wider community and its willingness to assume some responsibility for the problems of society will have a profound effect on the creation of the Catholic moral conscience. What is the moral consciousness created among Catholics by the existence of papal ambassadors and the diplomatic involvement of the Vatican in the world of politics?

May I add that in my view the Catholic Church has been an extra ordinary teacher of a new moral consciousness over the last decade. The conflict in her own internal life, the shift of priorities that has taken place on many levels, and the new forms of involvement with others that have been assumed, have profoundly affected the conscience of the Catholic people. The effect has been so sudden and so vehement that some Catholics have found it very difficult to reconcile the new moral teaching with what they had learned in the

quiter days of institutional life. Other Catholics, on the other hand, have been greatly liberated: they have entered a new self-understanding and assumed a new moral role in the various societies to which they belong.

The Church, we have said, teaches morality through her institutional life. Secondly, the Church teaches morality through her message. This message includes, first of all, the proclamation of scripture and the making present of Jesus Christ in sacramental worship. Here Christians encounter God's living Word, know themselves addressed by the divine voice, are unsettled, made restless, and led to greater self-knowledge; here they find the freedom to turn away from destructiveness to greater faith, hope and love. Here the conscience of Christians is tuned to the redemptive truths of sin, forgiveness, and new life. Here they are made critical, learn to submit all aspects of life to the judgment of the Gospel, open themselves to new ways of friendship and community. Here the Church is moral teacher by bringing Christians in touch with the living voice of God.

The message of the Church also includes her moral doctrine. This has usually been called her magisterium. This moral doctrine, we have indicated, is a function of the theological anthropology prevailing in the Church. It is true that certain elements of this anthropology are revealed in the history of Israel and the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and recorded in the scriptures. Yet the total view of who man is and is to be also depends on the self-understanding Christians acquire in dialogue with contemporary culture and is, therefore, closely related to the forms of institutional life in which they live. Man acquires and formulates his self-understanding, in part at least, in accordance with the institutional patterns through which he participates in the community and is as it were created by it. The moral doctrine of the Church, therefore, is a reflection of her life as an institution.

Because of the Church's historical nature, her moral teaching is bound to change in different ages. While we may find this difficult to accept, the historical evidence for this is all too obvious. We need only think of the moral norms by which Catholics have related themselves to outsiders, to non-Catholic Christians, to heterodox Catholics, to Jews, Moslems, and others to see how radical the changes are that

have taken place in the Church's official morality. Yet the interpretation proposed above enables us to affirm that throughout these changes of moral teaching, there remained an abiding divinely-created orientation, revealed in the Gospel, namely the orientation towards growth and reconciliation. The approach here adopted enables us to acknowledge the changes in the Church's moral teaching, and at the same time affirm the abiding nature of Christian morality.

The present official moral teaching of the Church, with which—as I have indicated—I find it difficult to identify myself, corresponds to the Church's institutional life of the past as well as to the highly static understanding of man correlative to this institutional life. What is taking place at this time is the emergence of a new Catholic self-experience, induced in part through new institutional processes of contemporary society, including the Church. Hence I foresee that the process begun at Vatican II will continue and that the official teaching on morality as well as the ecclesiastical patterns of institutional life will eventually be conformed to the new Catholic self-understanding. The doctrinal magisterium of the Church, supported and partially derived from her institutional life, would then become a powerful factor in the unification and concentration of the Christian movement and make a significant contribution to the creation of a world-wide and new consciousness, by which human life may become more truly human.

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