

## RESPONSE TO PROFESSOR COLLINS—I

The main thing that strikes me about Professor Collins' scholarly paper is that it is much more than an academic exercise in biblical theology. It contributes in a substantive way to an important pastoral question in the Church today. Very many Catholics simply do not understand what moral theologians are up to these days. They assume that we Catholics possess a divinely revealed morality which has been disclosed to us in the Bible and is interpreted and transmitted to us by the magisterium, and as good Catholics it is our duty to learn what it is and to teach it to others.

As pastors and religious educators know, the question in the minds of parents often takes this form: "What happened to the ten commandments? Are you teaching them to our children?" It is not enough for pastors and religion teachers to pacify parents with pedagogical reasons such as, "We are stressing assimilation of values rather than memorization of rules," or "We are trying to instill a positive rather than negative approach to morality." A deeper theological question must be faced: Are the ten commandments God's revealed law as is commonly believed, or are they rather man's self-understanding at a certain time in history? A similar question must be asked about the moral precepts in the New Testament.

Crudely put, the basic question is this: Can a Christian find a code of ethics in the Bible or does he have to formulate his own as he moves through history? Did God do our casuistry for us once and for all, or do we have to do our own in our own times?

Professor Collins did not touch on the Old Testament. But, as far as I can tell, contemporary research indicates that the precepts of the decalogue are not moral imperatives issued by God for all men and all times. Rather they too are culture-bound, limited in their moral insightfulness, and reflect a particular moment in history.

The first three (or four) commandments reflect Yahweh's covenant with Israel, and the last seven (or six) reflect the mores and ethical standards common in the Near East. The whole decalogue was seen and read in the context of God's covenant with Israel, but those command-

ments dealing with a man's relationship with his neighbor were not unique in Israel, nor were they any better or more moral than the law of Israel's neighbors.

The limitation of Israel's moral insight at the time is well known. In its original form the fourth commandment was simply, "Do not curse your father or mother." The fifth commandment did not forbid killing or murder but rather any illegal killing which was harmful to the community, even if it was accidental. The sixth commandment prohibited sexual intercourse with a woman who was the property of another man but said nothing about a married man copulating with an unmarried woman. Originally the seventh commandment was meant to outlaw the kidnapping of a free Israelite man, and the ninth and tenth forbade the stealing of dependent persons like women, children and slaves as well as property but said nothing about mental coveting. And the eighth commandment excluded false witness in a court of law but said nothing about lying.

Professor Collins has indicated that the biblical authors of the New Testament did not disclose to us a new morality but rather a new reality. They accepted the moral wisdom of their times and put it in a new theological context. He also alluded to the limitation of some of the moral norms, like Paul's reflection of the responsibilities "in the Lord" of women and slaves.

All of this goes to support the current theological view that Christian ethics is no different than human ethics in its specific material content. That is what nearly everyone is saying these days: human morality and Christian morality are materially identical. God does not do our moral casuistry for us. The Bible does not disclose any concrete moral imperatives which natural human wisdom cannot come to by itself.

The gospel does not supply material moral norms but rather a vision of the true meaning of life and the nature and destiny of man. As Christians we may have a distinct and unique theology and anthropology but we do not have a distinctive morality. Our Christian faith helps to illumine the genuine human good, sensitizes us to discover and appreciate it, and motivates us to embrace it. But it does not disclose to us moral truths which other men cannot come to in other ways. In what measure the Christian has distinctive attitudes and a distinctive

intentionality in his moral behavior is being argued, and tomorrow morning Professors Curran, McCormick and Gustafson will further that discussion.

In the meantime I would merely like to point up one question for discussion. I take the conclusion from Professor Collins' paper and the current theological speculation to be that none of the moral imperatives in the Bible are binding on us today simply for the reason that they are contained in Sacred Scripture. If they are binding on us today it is only for the reason that we still believe them to be true and that they still reflect what is authentically human or moral in our times.

We will do our contemporary casuistry in the light of the gospel and our faith tradition, not as merely philosophical men. We will do our new casuistry in an old context. We will do it in the same context as the New Testament authors, the context of belief in the good news of Jesus Christ. We will do it in the context not only of the living faith community but of a long tradition of a faith community which is a carrier of ethical norms. Nonetheless we will do it in the context of our culture and our times. As we go through history we will do the moral casuistry appropriate to our age, revising when necessary the moral norms in the Bible.

This leads me to the question I would like to raise for discussion. It is something which is far from clear in my own mind. The question is simply this: what is the proper role of the magisterium in the ongoing Christian search for moral norms?

Certainly it is not the role affirmed by the American bishops' 1971 *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Health Facilities*, which says: "The moral evaluation of new scientific developments and legitimately debated questions must be finally submitted to the teaching authority of the Church in the person of the local Bishop, who has the ultimate responsibility for teaching Catholic doctrine." Even the 1955 edition of the *Directives* was less sanguine about the competence of local bishops to evaluate new scientific developments and settle legitimately debated questions. It said: "In questions legitimately debated by theologians, liberty is left to physicians to follow the opinions which seem to them more in conformity with the principles of sound medicine."

I would suggest for the purpose of discussion that in the light of

contemporary findings like those of Professor Collins and others the role of the ecclesiastical magisterium is very important but considerably more modest than the bishops' recent *Directives* suppose.

In the light of the current discussion about the source and nature of Christian ethics perhaps the proper role of the magisterium can be put as follows. The magisterium as such has no special charism or competence to discover or determine what is morally good or evil. As God did not do our casuistry for us, neither did he commission the magisterium to do it in his place. To discover and formulate appropriate ethical norms is the ongoing task of the Christian community of faith. Although the magisterium can participate in the conversation about moral norms, its distinctive role is to teach the theological context of Christian ethics and those specific norms which arise in the collective wisdom of the Church.

The magisterium's service to the Church is not to decide moral questions but to reflect the current consensus of the Christian community on what is or is not appropriate Christian behavior. As the Christian community engages in ethical discourse the magisterium will continue to preach to it the unique theological context in which Christian ethics is done, to reflect the community's consensus in its ethical teaching, and to authentically and officially proclaim that consensus to the whole world.

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