

## THE MORAL THEOLOGIAN AS PARTICIPANT

Ever since the Greeks, it has been customary to assert that truth lies "in the middle," in the moderate, inclusive position on any question. I suspect the Greeks were right, at least as regards the question we are considering this afternoon. I suspect that the truth is: Moral theologians must be participant-analysts, or analytical and thoughtful participants.

But this inclusive answer is too easy. It allows us to move too quickly past an important question. If the extreme positions, participant and analyst, are caricatures, still they also symbolize points of view which are real, which we encounter in one another as we do our theological work and which do not always work easily together.

So I ask you to join me in pretending that the inclusive answer is not the right answer. For our time together, let us pretend that we really *do* have to choose between the two extremes. And within the confines of this little game, let me tell you why I am convinced that moral theologians must be participants, not analysts, if they are to fulfill their theological function.

Let me pursue this idea two ways.

First, historically. I am struck by the fact that for the first millenium of the life of the Christian community, all theology was participant. The location of scholarship within the pastoral arena and the monastic life guaranteed that theological reflection would be related to Church life. Even after the rise of the medieval universities, theology functioned within a Christian culture. And that seems to me to have guaranteed a whole variety of relationships between scholarship and, if you will forgive the term, real life.

I am not a professional historian, but I wonder if the progressive detachment of theological work from the life of the Church—and, indeed, even the inclination to conceive of such a detachment—is not a byproduct of the Reformation. Or perhaps it owes more to the secularization of thought in the Enlightenment. In any case, the Church itself became alienated from culture, intellectual work became viewed as a characteristic activity of culture, and thus the theological enterprise became distanced from the life of the Church. In some cases, thoroughly alienated from that life, but in most cases at least distanced from it.

But even here, moral theology has been a bit different. That is because the increasing juridicization of Church life, and the ability of a moral theology cross-fertilized with canon law to respond to the questions posed by such a Church, kept this branch of theology more involved than most. Of course, to some extent this continued involvement of moral theology in the life of the Church was at the price of its own intrinsic and scholarly development as a discipline. But at least it did participate through the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Indeed, in many ways that participation continues today. Question and answer columns in Catholic periodicals, the humbling tendency of

Catholics, clergy and lay, to "consult the moralist," even the anxiety provoked when a moral theologian espouses a controversial position: all this attests to the fact that moral theology has been unusually involved in church life throughout the post-Tridentine period. And this participation has been greatly influential in the daily lives of ordinary people. In fact, I think it is fair to say that the participant position of moral theology has been a position of real power, of opportunity to guide and shape the lives of believing people.

But then came the renewal of moral theology with which we are all familiar. The rebirth of ethical scholarship, some would say. A desire to reintegrate Christian ethics into the broader theological enterprise, to make use of the advances of biblical scholarship, to root itself in a more thoughtful and more historically nuanced ecclesiology, to reorient itself toward the idealism of Christian spirituality, and so forth. And how to do this?

The answer is obvious: leave the Church. Break with those institutional concerns and sectarian issues. Eschew the position of power, on the one hand. Escape the prison of practicality, on the other. The other theological disciplines now inhabit the university; they belong to culture, not Church. If these disciplines choose to participate in life at all, it is not through the medium of a living tradition incarnated in real, specific people and ambiguous unyielding institutional structures. Rather, these disciplines participate through the more neutral and unrooted medium of secularized intellectual inquiry. So also must moral theology.

No way! Let us even accept, for purposes of discussion, that moral theology, as it functions within the Church, does experience itself as constricted and at times intimidated. Does that necessarily imply that moral theology should reconceive itself as a university discipline, should follow the rest of theology out of the Church and into academe? Could it not also imply that when the rest of theology allowed itself to become detached from church life the price was indeed high? A Church that does not think, a Church which does not regularly confront past syntheses with new questions and new concerns, is bound to be a constricting Church. And so the solution is not for moral theology to assume an analytic posture, but for the other theological disciplines to participate once again. Or so I would like to suggest.

Of course, it does not logically follow that, in order for an ethicist to participate in life and contribute to its shaping, he or she must also be actively involved in church life. But if one is talking about moral *theology*, I think it may mean precisely that. After all "moral theology," really means religious ethics done within the context of a Christian commitment—and Christian ethics rooted in the Catholic tradition. And our topic is "moral theologian, participant or analyst." So I think it is fair to assert that my position must include participation in church life (without, of course, limiting itself to that arena).

But in any case, these last reflections lead me to my second line of thought, where I want to reflect theologically on our topic.

We are all familiar with the traditional definition of theology as *fides quaerens intellectum*. The definition seems to me to be apt, and the

implications of it are noteworthy. The definition implies that faith is prior to theology, at least logically prior, and that theology serves faith. Just as the papers which Dr. Surlis and I are presenting exist in service to the shared reflections and discussions of this group, so theology, with its process of reflection, organization and articulation, exists in service to that relational conviction we call faith. Indeed, I would hold that the ultimate test of theological concepts and categories is to be found less in their logical consistency and more in their redundancy with the experience of believing people.

Of course, the service relationship between theology and faith is mutual. Faith needs theology as well. And this in several different ways. First, I am a thinking being; that is part of what it means to be human. Hence, I cannot *not* reflect, organize and articulate my faith experience. Indeed, I have no other way to make that experience present even to myself. We are all aware of this; we know that when people occasionally issue a call for "evangelization unencumbered by theology" they are deluding themselves. There is no such thing.

Secondly, we often need this theological enterprise to test, and perhaps purify, our experience; theology is a tool in the "discernment of spirits." And finally, the theological enterprise allows us to place our faith within a communal context, allows us to nourish our faith with the insights based on the experience of others; it forces us to challenge our faith with the articulated experience of others.

And so there is a mutuality between faith and theology: theology is nothing else than faith conceptualized, and faith is theology's experiential root. Still, besides this mutuality there also exists a priority. Faith comes first, and in the end theology must serve and be accountable to that faith. And since faith resides in life and in persons, it follows that theology is accountable to life. Indeed, in some sense theology is constituted by a relationship to life. Hence theologians who ignore their relationship to life, and the relationship their work has to life, theologians who refuse to participate, are ignoring reality.

If this is true of theology, it is exponentially more true of moral theology. I take it that the human person is a "moral animal." That is, to be human seems to entail being unavoidably confronted by ethical questions, by questions of right and wrong, good and bad. The human person who is a believer will no doubt seek to answer those inevitable questions in a way that is congruent with, and nourished by, faith. And thus the believer will find himself or herself engaged in "moral theology." The professional moral theologian is simply one who does this in a systematic and more rigorous way. And just as the individual believer is led to the questions of moral theology by real-life needs and uses moral theology to meet those needs more adequately, so the professional moral theologian should be guided by the same priorities.

As moral theologians, we exist, I contend, because life needs clarification, because values need affirmation, because decision-making needs facilitation. Our thinking serves the thinking of other Christians. And their thinking serves the conduct of their lives. We are, in other

words, tremendously important participants in the living of Christian and human life.

I would like to think that the remarks I have made thus far would suffice. But I am aware that in our finite, imperfect, sinful world they are not. So by way of conclusion, let me respond to an objection commonly offered against this position.

In the judgment of some, there is a great danger in this "participant" approach. Namely: it makes the theologian a part of a political process, turns his or her intellectual enterprise into a cog in the wheel of bureaucratic functioning and co-opts the search for truth with excessive concern for "keeping people happy." When theology allows itself to become "involved" in life, it tends to attach its efforts to the short term and apparent needs of people. And when this happens, theology betrays its own identity as the disciplined search for faith-understanding.

I would acknowledge this danger. Theology, like any intellectual enterprise, can be bent to self-serving ends by institutions, groups and individuals. But still, in answer to the objection, I would note two other points.

First, if, in order to avoid this temptation, theology were to allow itself to become detached from life and from living issues, then it would betray its own identity. After all, the argument of this presentation is less that the institution needs moral theology (though it does) and more that, to be true to itself, moral theology needs the institution, or at least the people who comprise the institution. Therefore, I am arguing precisely that we must be participants to be true to ourselves.

Secondly, I do not think this temptation needs to be victorious. Rather, in order to conquer the temptation to improper compromise, it is only necessary that participant theologians keep clear the mode of their participation. We participate precisely by making available our wisdom. When and to the extent that we betray that wisdom, when and to the extent that we bend its insights to the other ends, when and to the extent that we allow it to be replaced by factors of power or convenience, then and to that extent do we cease to participate. But it need not be so. We can remain involved in the real issues of Church and state, we can dialogue with the world and learn from the world and make a contribution to the growth of the world, we can do all that and still be theologians. Indeed, only if we do this will we be theologians at all.

Let me put this one last way. I am convinced that moral theologians must be participants in life, and not just analysts of it. I am convinced that moral theologians should see their work as a ministry, with all the relational and mutually accountable implications of that term. And I am convinced that, if we understand our gift in this ministry to be the gift of wisdom, then we need not fear being compromised by this involvement in life. To be a moral theologian is to have accepted the ministry of *wisdom*; but it is also to have accepted the *ministry* of wisdom.

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