

THE MORAL THEOLOGIAN AS ANALYST

Every reflective, believing Christian is, to some degree or other, a moral theologian since "our own lives as we live them" are what moral theology is about as Timothy O'Connell reminds us in his *Principles for a Catholic Morality*.¹

In this paper I assume that by moral theologian is meant the person who from the context of a concrete situation-in-life (*Sitz im Leben*) reflects on, analyzes, clarifies, criticizes and systematizes the meaning of Christian life and behavior. While my reflections are principally about the formal moral theologian, in the sense just described, we do well not to isolate the moral theologian from the community or to forget that the whole Church is a teaching Church just as the whole Church is a learning Church.² Neither must we separate too much the moral dimensions of our faith from the faith as a totality lest we distort both in the process. There is a tendency at times to identify the Christian reality with morality—usually, however, with morality defined in a very narrow and restrictive sense—and then to deny the name Christian to persons who dissent on certain moral issues.

SITZ IM LEBEN

It is, I believe, of the utmost importance for moral theologians (as well as all other theologians) to reflect self-consciously on their concrete situation in life with its manifold implications for doing theology. It is not enough, in other words, to start with Scripture and Tradition or with a history of the discipline of moral theology (usually a history which refuses to face the really difficult questions posed by the tradition) and then incorporate new insights from some contemporary disciplines. In this way continuity with the past may be achieved but at the expense of increasing irrelevance where contemporary major moral issues are concerned. Moreover, the critical creativity, which resolution of these issues requires, may not be forthcoming from either the community or the theologian unless the issues are seen as integral to the process of doing moral theology from the start in the sense of providing a major portion of its agenda.

We all live simultaneously in several intermeshing communities—the family, religious community, university, seminary, parish, diocese and nation; all of these influence moral theologians profoundly both in their personal lives and in the angle of vision from which they perceive reality. Before we look at aspects of this influence let us recall that we all live in a community that includes all the others, including the universal Church, and this is the global community which today makes profound

¹(New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

²See the excellent article "Authority and the Christian Conscience" by B. C. Butler in the *Clergy Review* 60 (January, 1975), 3-17.

demands on all of us but especially on those who claim to articulate the moral vision of the Church in a systematic way.

GLOBAL COMMUNITY

If, for a moment, we visualize the global community in the shape of a pyramid then at the base of the pyramid are massed more than a billion persons—one quarter of the population of the earth—and despite world-attention having been focused on their plight for well over a decade, their condition grows worse.³ Among them the burdens of poverty fall heaviest on persons of black or brown color and always disproportionately on women, children, the elderly and the handicapped. Many religious and political leaders point out that the oppressions arising out of race, ethnicity, age, sex and being handicapped are exacerbated by the arms race (itself frequently economically motivated) and by various armaments programs which threaten to destroy human life and at present are devouring resources which should be employed in the service of making human life more human for all persons.

In 1971 the Synod of Bishops spoke of the "... serious injustices which are building around the world of men (human beings) a network of dominations, oppressions and abuses which stifle freedom and which keep the greater part of humanity from sharing in the building up and enjoyment of a more just and fraternal world."⁴ So far I have only been repeating sketchily what Paul VI dealt with in some detail and what he summarized when he said: "The principal fact that we must all recognize is that the social question has become world-wide."⁵ Perhaps what we should say is that the moral question has become world-wide. I say this on the one hand to force the realization that barriers have been built in Catholic consciousness (and in our own) between social and moral issues and, on the other hand, to make us realize that the significant moral issues which confront us as theologians are social-personal and have structural and global dimensions.

Where oppressions such as poverty, hunger, unemployment, substandard living conditions, lack of medical facilities and poor educational resources exist, intense human suffering and deprivation exist. This is institutionalized injustice and constitutes sinful social circumstances. The evils which these oppressions cause stunt and destroy the persons immediately affected by them. They also damage the social fabric as a whole and in this sense all are affected by them.

ANALYZING OPPRESSION

Oppressions exist and operate in different degrees in all societies and so there are many liberation movements today. We, as theologians, are called on to analyze the oppressions, how they interlock and rein-

³See Barbara Ward, "Looking Back at *Populorum Progressio*," *Catholic Mind* (November, 1978), 9-25.

⁴"Justice in the World," in *The Gospel of Justice and Peace*, ed. by Joseph Gremillion (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1977), 114.

⁵*Octogesima Adveniens*, par. 5.

force each other and to formulate a theological response in fidelity to the liberating thrust of the essential Christian message. One may distinguish several interrelated areas where oppressions exist and where liberating praxis is called for. Persons and classes who struggle against exploitation and economic injustice must not sacrifice political freedom in the effort to achieve liberation from economic injustice. Political freedom, social and economic justice belong together and must *all* be struggled for.⁶

Where oppressions based on race, sex and class are struggled against, solidarity of those discriminated against is called for—rather than the antagonism of groups who are sometimes manipulated into fighting each other rather than engaging the common enemy. The elimination of such oppressions calls above all for the creation of the appropriate economic and political conditions under which alone such exploitations can be overcome. There is no need to emphasize that integral human liberation is possible only where correct ecological relationships are maintained. The natural environment no less than political freedom must not be sacrificed to the elimination of poverty, to cite but one example.

As we attend to the structural nature of oppressions and their interrelatedness in our endeavour to overcome the individualism which has for so long bedevilled theology and especially moral theology, we must not neglect the sphere of personal responsibility. In this connection it must be stressed that freedom from economic, political, cultural and environmental oppression does not automatically produce better persons. How potentialities are realized and how freedom is exercised remain inescapable personal decisions with religious dimensions especially when there is reference to life's meaning or emptiness.⁷

Persons who are not subjected to any of the oppression arising from political, economic or natural causes may, however, be apathetic, narcissistic, discouraged or altogether unconcerned about the suffering and exploitation of others. Such persons are not authentically liberated and they are not likely to engage in actions on behalf of justice or the transformation of society unless they are led to repentance and to the view that such action is constitutive of what it is to be human and *a fortiori* of being a Christian today.

OPPRESSION IN THE CHURCH

Oppressions exist also within the Church especially in the predominant failure to allow their proper participation to the laity—particularly to women—in all areas where they have a right to be participants. And we as theologians have several tasks here, among which is the effort to recognize how far we may contribute to the oppression of others and also how far we are called on to participate in

⁶ See Jürgen Moltmann, "A Definitive Study Paper: A Christian Declaration on Human Rights," in *A Christian Declaration on Human Rights*, ed. by Allen O. Miller, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), pp. 129-43.

⁷ See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Future of Creation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1977), pp. 109-14.

liberation movements to identify and secure the full human rights of others in the Church including our own rights as theologians when these are threatened by restrictive ecclesiastical policies.

Theologians who expressed their inability to assent to *Humanae vitae* in 1968 did a signal service in the Church, not without a struggle, and not without immense cost, as they well know. Theologians who advocate more openness in Catholic theology—especially in moral theology with its many sensitive issues—continue invaluable liberating praxis which involves analysis and participation (if the latter is not too mild a word to describe the plight of some who are under a cloud because they exercise their right to question, dissent and propose new solutions to moral dilemmas).

THE CHURCH'S STANCE?

Since 1891 the Catholic Church has done a good job of analyzing injustices and oppressions in areas relating to industrial relations, and more recently with reference to social, political and economic issues both on national and international levels. Increasing attention has been paid to the global dimensions of injustices and to their institutionalized or structural aspects. And there have been various degrees of commitment by regional churches, by some religious orders and by many groups of lay persons, to liberation movements, sometimes at the expense of persecution and even martyrdom, and almost always at the risk of creating misunderstanding about the Church's role on social, political and economic affairs.

Parenthetically we may remark here that papal and episcopal teaching on public affairs is frequently ahead of the thinking of many Church members, including most moral theologians, who only infrequently address such topics as poverty, unemployment, economic democracy, racism, prisons, the social causes of crime and human rights issues in general. Perhaps this will continue to be the case until we rethink the distinction between moral theology and social teaching. Instead of separating the moral and social as we frequently do at present (thereby reducing moral theology to an individualistic ethic) we need to integrate them and consider all moral issues from a social-personal perspective that is dialectical from the outset. Human reality, after all, is itself constituted by the reciprocal relationships between individual and society.⁸ Otherwise the impression will continue to be given that social concerns are optional in terms of the commitment they require from Catholics; moral problems will be treated without adequate attention being paid to their social, political and economic contexts.

What I wish to stress here, however, is that at present, together with the Church's analysis of contemporary social-political-economic problems, there is a questioning of the Church by the victims of our contemporary world and especially by those who live in conditions of

⁸I have dealt with this in more detail in "Towards a New Model for Moral Argument in Christian Ethics—A Response to Richard McCormick, S.J.," a paper read at the University of Notre Dame symposium, Towards a Constructive Christian Ethics, March, 1980, publication forthcoming.

intense human deprivation, and suffering. The questions being posed may have much to teach us as we go about our business of self-analysis. As church members we are questioned as to our loyalties and priorities: Whose side are we on? Are we a Church of the powerful or the marginalized? Are we on the side of the many oppressed and frequently voiceless persons of the world? Are we aware that we must choose sides, that it is impossible to maintain a detached neutral stance and that refusal to choose sides is already to have chosen the side of the powerful?

As moral theologians we must be aware of the political implications of how we define and pursue our theological tasks. For example, if we define certain restricted areas of human behavior (important as these may be in themselves) as *the* field of moral theology we implicitly convey the impression that these issues, which in the past have tended too much to be related to sexual behavior or medical-ethical concerns somewhat remote from most peoples' lives, and these alone, define the scope of Christian concern. Powerful interest groups who resent the Church taking a stance on social, economic and political issues would be glad to see us do just that. But what would at first seem to be a non-political moral stance would in effect say: "That whole public world out there is alright"; "It is too complex for me to deal with it; I can deal only with personalist ethics." Either way, this amounts to relinquishing the struggle in the public arena and in a manner that supports the *status quo*. This approach—if adopted even implicitly, since few would adopt it explicitly—leads to a failure to identify the major moral issues of our time. It also leads to inadequate analysis of the issues chosen for analysis by moral theologians. This is in no way to suggest that issues of a personalist nature are unimportant. What is being said is that all personalist (which is not the same as individualistic) issues have wider social, political and economic contexts, that if these are ignored the resultant analysis of the moral issues dealt with is of limited validity only. Study of recent moral theology—that emanating from formal moral theologians—shows little or no emphasis on the economic, political or social contexts. The most valuable statements which take these contexts into account are those of Paul VI, Medellín, the Synod of Bishops, statements of national hierarchies, including some excellent statements from the United States and Canadian Bishops, Puebla and John Paul II. The writings of Gregory Baum, Rosemary Ruether and other theologians of liberation must be mentioned even though these would normally be classified as systematic rather than moral theologians. However, in the works of these theologians, that distinction is breaking down and these writers surpass many moral theologians in their incorporation of the central themes of systematic theology into treatises dealing with major moral-social issues of our day.

THEOLOGY AS POLITICAL

In order to fulfill her/his task as clarifier, critic and systematizer of the meaning of Christian behavior in our world the moral theologian

must perform a task that is primarily intellectual and rational. But if moral theologians are always aware that they are persons from a particular race, class and sex (and up to the present the majority of those doing formal moral theology have been male, middle-class clerics) then the world of academe, whether in seminary or university, will be less likely to blinker their vision and focus it on a limited set of issues which in the long run may be problems only for the privileged and affluent.

We know from history that it is not easy to escape a blunting of moral sensitivity when one lives in the security and relative isolation of the academy—not to mention the limits imposed by the status of being celibate clerics when that is the case.

Being in the academy does not mean that the theologian is not concerned about transforming Church and society, that is, that the theologian is not concerned about the political implications of faith understood as praxis. The example of Karl Barth is instructive here. As a pastor in Safenwil, Switzerland, Barth combined pastoral activity, theology and active involvement in local and national politics indissolubly together. Gollwitzer tells us that Barth established unions, organized strikes and travelled widely speaking on political issues. He did not avoid conflict with the wealthy or with factory owners and earned himself the title of the "red pastor."⁹

What is still more interesting is that when Barth became a theology professor he still regarded himself as having a political task to fulfill which was to establish a "solid foundation for Christian thought and action." Barth never saw his task as a systematic theologian to be aimed at interpretation or understanding only. There was always an orientation to change and to the transformation both of Church and society in his most rigorously academic work. Barth had first hand experience of the terrible consequences visited on people and society by false interpretations of the gospel and his constant work of reinterpreting Christian thought was aimed at the type of praxis in which he himself engaged while he was a pastor in Safenwil.

It is also interesting for us to note that Barth was not afraid of a definite option for socialism as more consonant with gospel values. Indeed, he constantly called on the Church to keep itself "leftist" and to confess itself as fundamentally on the side of the victims of social disorder¹⁰—an interesting anticipation of the call of Medellin and Puebla for the Church to express a "preferential option for the poor."

Moral theologians today cannot ignore the political implications of theology which are always there whether explicitly recognized or not. The challenge is to recognize them and their implications for all moral issues. In the essential gospel message, in a critically re-interpreted theology—the achievement of which may be our major present concern—in our liturgical celebrations, in our solidarity with each other and in our cooperating with others who struggle for a more human

⁹Helmut Gollwitzer, "Kingdom of God and Socialism in the Theology of Karl Barth," in *Karl Barth and Radical Politics*, ed. and trans. by Georg Hunsinger (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), pp. 77-129.

¹⁰*Church Dogmatics* III/4, 544, cited by Gollwitzer, *op. cit.*, p. 83.

world, we are always participants even when we are engaged in our most academic tasks.

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