

A RESPONSE TO ANNE PATRICK

I begin by adding my thanks to the applause which Anne Patrick received for her fine and stimulating paper.

The fate of respondents to major papers at the CTSA can be that they try to do too much or too little. If they do too much they wind up giving their own papers or the papers they feel the speaker should have given. If they attempt too little they add nothing to the program and might as well have not spoken at all. I shall try to avoid both extremes, but the attempt which does too little has one singular virtue, it is brief! So, in formulating my response I have decided if I am to be faulted it will be for doing too little.

What I shall do is simply comment on three points of Anne Patrick's speech that she or others may wish to develop further.

1. In the first part of her talk where she sketches the history of the linguistic turn, Professor Patrick suggests three ways that the plurality and ambiguity resulting from the linguistic turn complicates life for moral theologians. The first complication is epistemological; and I quote, "we can at best strive for relative adequacy in our given social-historical circumstances."

For some time now moral theology has been moving away from the certitude produced by syllogistic reasoning to arguments grounded in what might be called "appropriateness." The search is for the "fitting" response to the moral situation and often the discernment process yields something less than a crystal clear conclusion. The confidence we have in our insights will vary depending on a number of elements but a strong note of modesty and tentativeness is found in the writings of many moral theologians today.

This asymptotic approach to moral wisdom is, I believe, one of the points of contention among ethicists today. It can be seen in a variety of ways. One illustration is the tension between those who shy away from the language of absolutes at the level of material norms and those others who find expressions like "virtually exceptionless norms" too vague or open to abuse. Part of this divide is methodological to be sure, but the background issue may well be a question of what degree of certainty is expected or presumed achievable in moral matters. Is it possible that a lengthy period of high casuistry generated an overconfidence in our ability to clearly understand and analyze moral reality?

2. This leads to my second observation on Anne Patrick's presentation. Speaking of the search for relative adequacy in moral knowledge she states that she is "convinced" it can only be found in a disciplinary conversation that does not tire of acknowledging its own ambiguities Now one of the clear ambiguities of the conversation is that it has been dominated by white male clerics. Those of us who fit that description may feel, at times, like a besieged group, but

letting go of positions of control and dominance usually will produce some distress.

Patrick, of course, is too fair and wise to call for a simple dismissal of what we have learned already from the ongoing conversation that is tradition; she only wishes to let more voices into the discussion. The issue is what she calls "the politics of language use." "Who has been saying what to whom?" is her question, and the unspoken but obvious answer reveals the one-sided nature of the exchange. When the membership of the discussion group expands we may get to hear some interesting things, perhaps for the first time. The final section of Professor Patrick's address when she looks "beyond the linguistic turn" to a new theology and pastoral practice of sexual morality is the sort of stimulating and fresh perspective I have in mind.

When the previously marginalized are brought into the conversation a question arises however. What do we expect of the new voices? How will they enrich our conversation? There is a strengthened appreciation today that the marginalized, the poor, the oppressed are God's privileged ones. Indeed, according to Anne Patrick, the next great turn must be the "turn to the oppressed." What shall we hear, then?

My question can be put another way. Are we proposing there is a group within the church that has a privileged position epistemologically? If so, how to explain the basis for that claim? And are there other groups with a claim to privileged understanding? What I am pointing out is that we still have to work out a way of relating the experience and knowledge of the previously marginalized to the others who are already part of the conversation. In the more inclusive community of moral discourse what role for theologians in the ecclesial assembly? And what of the hierarchy? Simply asking the questions reminds us that present strategies and structures for facilitating a healthy dialogue fall short by a good distance.

3. I agree with Anne Patrick that there is a risk for moral theologians in taking the linguistic turn in the road if we allow ourselves to go down the dead-end of what Daniel Maguire, in his book, *The Moral Choice*, has called the "linguistic bypass." We must not "confuse busyness about moral language with the business of doing ethics." As Patrick says, the analysis of "linguistic phenomena without regard to normative considerations and practical implications is a temptation we ought to resist." But I am not sure it has ever been a very seductive temptation for Christian ethicists.

Roman Catholic moral theologians, especially, have been people who "got down to cases." If anything it was the foundational theological issues that have been neglected by moral theologians. All too frequently the theological horizon out of which one's ethical principles emerge is the neglected part of essays or books in moral theology. James Gustafson's recent two volume work *Ethics from a Theocentric Perspective* and Germain Grisez's massive *The Way of the Lord Jesus* are attempts to provide a more systematic approach to moral theology. Whether one agrees or differs with the result, the project is a worthy one..

My viewpoint is that where the linguistic turn has focused on how language shapes our moral universe it has been beneficial and provides an important bridge for moralists to work with systematic and sacramental theologians as well as those

scholars in liturgical theology. The central part played by language, symbol, and ritual in the formation of the agent's imagination has provided fertile soil for moral theologians to till. Themes such as character, virtue, narrative and spirituality are receiving more attention from Catholic moral theologians. These developments have been promoted by the growing awareness of how language envelops a person.

Anne Patrick's paper has served to remind us of the evolution of the linguistic turn and the influence it has already had on the discipline of moral theology. She has pointed out several of the benefits of that influence as well as the challenges it presents to moral theologians. Finally, she has proposed a way of thinking "beyond the linguistic turn." In my remarks I simply have tried to suggest some initial items for a conversation between Anne Patrick and her appreciative colleagues.

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