

SEMINAR ON MORAL THEOLOGY

A. SPIRITUALITY AND DISCERNMENT IN MORAL THEOLOGY

The Moral Theology Seminar this year sponsored two plenary sessions, the first on "Spirituality and Discernment," and the second on "Imagination and the Moral Theologian's Prophetic Role." Dr. Monika Hellwig (Georgetown University) was the principal speaker at the first session. She opened her reflections by asking moral theologians to reflect on the distinction between a "code morality" as over against a morality based on inspiration.

The tension between code and inspiration can be found in Paul who, on the one hand was willing to scold a community (e.g., the Corinthians) for clear transgressions of rules, but on the other hand recognized that life in Christ transcended the law. The same strain can be found in Augustine's First Catechetical Instruction where despite his insisting that Christians know all the commandments, he ends in placing an even stronger emphasis on the great criteria, love of God and love of neighbor. Also, Thomas Aquinas even while developing a natural law ethic, yet when pressed to identify concrete content, keeps backtracking to the more formal axiom, "seek the good and avoid evil."

The very times in which we live, Hellwig suggests, require us to accent a morality based more on vision than norm. The explosion of the human sciences and the wider ecumenical sensitivity require that we not just look backward at a code *behind us*, but at the vision and hope *before us*. Moreover, rather than focusing on degrees of subjective guilt and freedom, an inspiration model of morality will tend better to assess the degree of moral disorientation in the situation itself. Thus the moral question becomes, how does one receive grace and pursue the graced life in the full social reality in which one finds oneself? Such a theology will be less oriented to an analysis of discrete acts and more attuned to reflecting on the entire social framework.

Hellwig then suggested that we take the common systematic category of creation-sin-redemption and consider its corresponding moral category of "good order, disorder, and re-ordering." In an inspiration-based morality the first moral question becomes not what norm have we kept or broken, but what possibilities and processes can we engage for *re-ordering* the human situation in which we find ourselves. Notice how this model of moral discernment will tend far less to support the status quo than the code model. Moreover, a morality which looks more to the possibilities of re-ordering the human situation will entail greater risk. The risk is not so much the jeopardy one undergoes from the upholders of the status

quo, but the very danger of human uncertainty. That is, despite one's best intentions one risks ending up on the wrong historical track.

To illustrate the difference between code and inspiration morality, Hellwig suggested that we consider the difference between just-war teaching and pacifism. Just-war teaching, she felt, lends itself more to a code mentality. While it attempts to moderate the level of violence, it basically accepts a status quo of violence as a legitimate means. Pacifism, however, tends to ask how can we look to a different future. Another example would be that of contract justice versus social justice. The former by definition seems more susceptible to an analysis of acts, whereas the latter asks how the entire situation needs re-ordering.

In an inspiration-based moral theology, are there criteria for discernment? Hellwig suggested some basic considerations. First the goal itself would have to be in harmony with the great Christian eschatological goal, namely total reconciliation with the transcendent God and with one another. Secondly, the means must intrinsically participate in the goal. One does not destroy a city in order to save it. One does not suppress human beings in order to free them. Thirdly, we must develop structures for reality-testing to avoid self-deception. This would imply a dialogue that is always multi-cultural, multi-class, multi-racial, etc. There is a basic Christian humility which requires deep recognition that we are less free of bias than we think in terms of culture, class, race, sex and even the self. Fourthly our criteria of discernment must be less individualistic than in the past, more aware of the subtlety of social consequence. Finally we must look more to a discernment in terms of both social need and social opportunity. Inspiration-based moral theology will look to seizing the historical moment. It will be clear that possibilities exist now that did not exist before.

Hellwig concluded by listing some of the advantages she saw in a morality governed more by inspiration. Its focus will be more positive, more clearly in dialogue with Christian spirituality, more willing to learn from praxis. The ethic of following Christ will be less mechanical, and will allow for other human and saintly mediations of Christ in history. Such a moral theology will of its very nature require not only instruction but encouragement and support. It will require a process of discernment that is essentially communitarian, and will accept greater responsibility for history. In our attempt to implement such a theology we may find ourselves closer to the early church's vision of sin as not only involving actions, but of sin seen as a radical state. Perhaps the beginnings of this transformed moral theology, she suggested, are already emerging within the basic ecclesial communities of the Third World, especially as they highlight conversion as a totally new way of life and as they require a radically new social discernment.

Father Pat McCormick, a Vincentian theologian from Mary Immaculate Seminary, Northampton, PA was the designated "responder" to Monika Hellwig's talk. Father McCormick began with an analogy taken from Alcoholics Anonymous. Moral theology, he said, must recover from its past, but without falling into a kind of mirror-image addictiveness. Thus, today's antagonists to the past by the very necessity of opposition often end up taking on the same ground of inquiry as their predecessors. Today's moral theology, for all its healthy reaction to past legalisms, has its own way of remaining still too fixed on act-analysis, still en-

meshed in individualistic categories, and still too focused on the subject to the neglect of the moral action's objective impact. For example, while a great deal of attention has been directed to issues such as premoral evil, too little attention is given the objective destructiveness which is injected into history by the disordered action.

McCormick saw three fundamental challenges for the future. First, there must be new voices brought to the conversation, especially the voices of the poor, the marginalized and the disenfranchised. Second, there must be greater recognition of the subtle biases that influence our own theologizing. For North Americans this implies especially some insight into the way our culture almost takes for granted the poverty existing at home and abroad, as well as the culture of violence which envelops us. Finally we have to ask ourselves about the very community out of which we theologize. It needs desperately to be enlivened by an imaginative spirit of hope, and willing to face clear-eyed our sins and dangers while able to keep faith in a God who calls us to transformation.

In the discussion that followed, while there was some demurring on specific points, most seemed to appreciate the general direction of both speakers. One participant cautioned on the dichotomy that sees "just-war" teaching as code-oriented and pacifism as inspiration-based. Such a dichotomy would miss, for example, how a "just-revolution" teaching could rise from an inspiration-based morality. Another participant questioned how in forging a more inspiration-based morality, we must avoid slipping into a sectarian posture. Another appreciated the way both speakers emphasized the danger of cultural prejudice. He then reminded the group of just such a prejudice in the way North American theologians are sometimes influenced by a kind of "NATO" theological hegemony. There was also helpful discussion as to how moral theology, even while avoiding the trap of focusing individualistically on the subjective, still cannot totally neglect a healthy concern about the morality of the human agent.

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B. IMAGINATION AND THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE MORAL THEOLOGIAN

The second working session in moral theology investigated the topic of "Imagination and the Prophetic Role of the Moral Theologian" in a session moderated by Judith A. Dwyer, with presentations by Philip S. Keane and Margaret Farley.

Philip Keane first noted the influence of Karl Rahner and Paul Ricoeur on his own interest in the role of imagination in moral theology. He then focused on certain issues which need continued investigation, including the relationship between imagination and emotion, the interrelationship between norms and imagination, the role of narrative, the implications for social issues (e.g., racial justice), and the need to articulate more clearly the connections between moral imagination and the liturgical-sacramental tradition in Catholicism, as well as the connections between imagination and feminism.

Margaret Farley drew from the works of Edward S. Casey, Gabriel Marcel, William F. Lynch, Margaret R. Miles, and Paul Ricoeur in her presentation. She opened with an invitation to engage in "an exercise in imagination" by asking all present to draw their understanding of the moral world and to share that drawing with a nearby colleague. Farley then went on to highlight the importance of both communication and concreteness when investigating the role of imagination and its prophetic implications for sexual, social, and bioethical issues.

The discussion which followed presentations by Keane and Farley centered on the following aspects of the question: the role of Scripture, the social function of imagination, the need for adequate criteria with which to evaluate the use of imagination, concerns regarding liturgy and preaching, and the need for appropriate symbols and role models (saints) today.

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