MORAL THEOLOGY I—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Moral Theology Topic I
Convener: Nancy M. Rourke, Canisius College
Moderator: William George, Dominican University
Presenters: Edward Vacek, Loyola University, New Orleans,
            Joseph McInerney, U.S. Naval Academy

This session explored intersections where the conference theme of conversion and virtue ethics meet. Following Bill George's introductions, Ed Vacek noted that the love of God must be the "central ordering love of our lives" and offered to leave it at that. While certainly this might be all that needs to be said, Vacek did agree to present the rest of his paper, "Emotional Foundation of Conversion." This paper brought our attention to the significance of the affections in conversion.

In order to work toward a sense of orthothymia or orthopathy (that is, right emotions), Vacek began with an exploration of the differences between emotions and the intellect and between emotions and practices. He noted that intellectual concepts appeal to us for reasons that are not entirely intellectual. This is significant for moral theology, a discipline seeking to develop intellectually graspable ethical ideas and ideals. Vacek also noted that theology can undermine the significance of emotions. And yet the emotions and virtue ethics seem to correlate; emotions by their very nature influence both action and internal states.

Vacek then addressed conversion, naming three levels (ongoing, regional, and fundamental conversion) and looking more closely at three kinds of ongoing conversion. Bringing in Christian anthropology to make sense of conversion, he identified emotions as that which ultimately inform the will. (He also argued that "sudden" conversions are actually led by slower, more subtle changes within a person's emotional "arrangements.") The paper demonstrated we ought to investigate emotions' ways of motivating and fueling individuals' and communities' thinking and practice.

Discussion followed. We considered differences between *conversion* and *growth* within the focus Vacek had outlined, the intertwined relationship between reasoning and emotions when we are making decisions, and pondered the possibility that reason's significance in the moral life might be in large part *after* decisions are made.

William George then introduced the next speaker, Joseph McInereny, who presented his paper, titled "Augustine's View of Conversion and Humility: Moral Foundations for Leadership." This paper investigated Augustine's thoughts on humility in order to show that humility is "able to counter (pride's) multiple threats" to moral development and leadership.

McInerney began with some description of his professional context as an active duty naval officer and a professor of ethics at the U.S. Naval Academy. He noted that the relationship between morality and leadership is often superficially understood. This is a problem because a vision of moral character is the foundation of the kind of trust that good leadership engenders. If this is so, then Augustine's thoughts on conversion and humility can be very helpful. They can support such a vision.

McInerney established some theological context for Augustine's discussions, describing his theological anthropology and the likely influence (at least to some

degree) of Plotinus. McInerney's nuanced and brisk literature review led into a description of how humility allows for and even enables conversion.

McInerney then drew connections between humility and leadership. Pride leads to resentment, jealousy, and envy, which inhibit leadership ability. Pride also motivates a person to self-service rather than service to others. It alienates. It impedes accurate self-perception. Humility, on the other hand, enables one to avoid these traps both within oneself and without, where they may manifest as aspects of the social organization within which leadership is expected.

A critical point at which pride gets in the way of good leadership is in the form of pride in one's own virtuousness. McInerney elaborated on this with an examination of "Bathsheba Syndrome," noting that individuals of great success and leadership tend to be morally defeated exactly as they are reaching the pinnacle of their success.

Following this paper, we discussed the roles of community and humor. McInerney noted that psychology identifies humor as a sign of emotional intelligence which is relevant to leadership. Self-deprecating humor in particular demonstrates this, as Bishop Wenski demonstrated in his welcome address. Broader implications of these papers were teased out by further discussion which considered other problems that come at the "pinnacle" of moral development (such as persistent moral "blind spots") and the ends and the social contexts of specific organizations within which leadership is exercised (such as the Church and the military). George concluded the session, noting that both excellent papers deserve further discussion and hoping that this would continue over the course of the rest of the meeting.

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