

## BOOK DISCUSSION

### Richard McCormick, *The Critical Calling: Reflections on Moral Dilemmas since Vatican II*

The session began with comments and questions posed first by Charles Curran of Southern Methodist University and then by Lisa Sowle Cahill of Boston College of *The Critical Calling* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989). Richard McCormick briefly commented in response, and then panel members entertained questions and responded to comments made by the general audience. A brief summary of the issues raised by Curran and Cahill follows.

#### I. CHARLES CURRAN

##### A. *Theologians and the Magisterium*

Curran first praised McCormick's respectful but also constructively critical approach to the hierarchical magisterium. He praised McCormick for developing several important themes: (1) that church "teaching" is not a primarily juridical category, (2) that church teaching has a "pluridimensional" nature rather than being reducible to authoritative pronouncements, and (3) that moral truth is not inherently mysterious or exempted from the usual procedures of human understanding and reflection. Curran found most important McCormick's insistence on the centrality of reason and reason-giving in Roman Catholic moral theology, over and against obscurantist alternatives.

Curran then raised several criticisms of McCormick's understanding of the relation of the magisterium and theologians. First, Curran pointed out that the distinction between "formulation" and "substance" employed by John XXIII and often applied by McCormick fails to honestly admit the fact of discontinuity and the need for genuine substantive doctrinal change, e.g., religious liberty. Second, Curran argued that McCormick has not sufficiently addressed the relation between the tentative nature of moral truth and the notion of the "authoritative teaching" of the hierarchical magisterium. Third, Curran argued that McCormick's description of the theologian's relation to the magisterium as "docile" has connotations of excessive subservience.

##### B. *McCormick as Casuist*

Curran focused on McCormick as "a classic casuist" in the "best sense of the term," that is, as a theologian who applies the moral doctrine of the church in a way that responsibly deals with the contingencies and ambiguities of contemporary human experience. While casuistry was properly criticized in the past (most

poignantly by Pascal) for claiming hegemony over moral theology as a whole, McCormick's "proportionalism" needs to be understood as a responsible development of traditional casuistry.

Curran then very briefly mentioned McCormick's limitations in this regard: that his development of a very sophisticated form of casuistry has not been complemented with a parallel development of underlying philosophical and theological issues or themes, e.g., the nature of virtue. Curran concluded with the suggestion that future moral theologians will not approach their subject matter with the background in casuistry that so characterizes McCormick's work.

## II. LISA SOWLE CAHILL

### *A. McCormick on Natural Law Ethics and Methodology*

Cahill first echoed Curran's criticism of the "substance"- "formulation" distinction, though in terms of McCormick's specific treatment of IVF therapies. Her primary attention then turned on the status of natural law, which McCormick seems to understand, Cahill argues, in a way that allows for a transcultural perspective that issues in universal moral norms known by all rational persons, and that is based on a human "essence." McCormick's employment of Rigali's distinction between "essential human ethics" and "essential Christian ethics" still tends to downplay particularity and employs an assumed anthropology that has been thrown into question by the work of MacIntyre and Stout. Cahill applauded McCormick's use of natural law as a counterweight to authoritarian ethics and ecclesiastical positivism, but suggested that this goal needs to be pursued with a more philosophically adequate method.

### *B. Medical and Sexual Issues*

Cahill praised McCormick for breaking away from the deductivist method of the manualist casuistry, particularly as he displays an effort to listen to the experience of those he finds confronted with deeply disturbing moral dilemmas. His treatment of both IVF and homosexuality give more weight to the moral facts of the cases as disclosed by the testimony of the relevant involved parties. She pointed out that the nuance of McCormick's conclusions reflect his deep appreciation of the need to listen to the persons actually involved in morally problematic situations, rather than on simply authoritatively pronouncing the teaching of the church on the moral law governing the category of specific acts under consideration. Cahill praised McCormick for clearly working within an abiding commitment to the objectivity of moral norms as well as to the centrality of experience in moral reflection.

Richard McCormick briefly responded to these comments and questions. He appreciated the care and honesty with which Curran and Cahill analyzed his writings, and thanked them for contributing to the development of his own thought. He agreed that his tendency to focus on particular cases reflects his own training as a moral theologian, particularly as shaped by the casuist tra-

dition. The audience discussion was lively, and tended to focus on the status of McCormick's natural law assumptions, the issue alluded to by Curran and explicitly developed by Cahill.

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