

philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

What is New About the New Catholic Morality?

Gerald W. Healy, S.J.

Philippine Studies vol. 20, no. 4 (1972): 633–652

Copyright © Ateneo de Manila University

Philippine Studies is published by the Ateneo de Manila University. Contents may not be copied or sent via email or other means to multiple sites and posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's written permission. Users may download and print articles for individual, noncommercial use only. However, unless prior permission has been obtained, you may not download an entire issue of a journal, or download multiple copies of articles.

Please contact the publisher for any further use of this work at philstudies@admu.edu.ph.

<http://www.philippinestudies.net>
Fri June 30 13:30:20 2008

What Is New About The New Catholic Morality?*

GERALD W. HEALY, S.J.

Let us start by saying that there *are* new things in Catholic morality. Some of them are already officially taught by the Church, others slowly coming to maturity in the writing of the theologians around the world. If there were nothing new, we would be unfaithful to the request of the Second Vatican Council which spoke specifically of moral theology and said: "Special attention needs to be given to the development of moral theology. Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching. Moral theology should show the nobility of the Christian vocation of the faithful and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world." This was in the decree of the Vatican Council on Priestly formation. It should comfort the faint-hearted and banish the fear that some feel at the very thought of change in something as basic as moral theology.

DEVELOPMENT CALLED FOR

The Church herself has asked for development, not the rejection of everything old, not the approval of everything new just because it is new. A love for the traditional is a sign of maturity, but an acceptance of change is a sign of life. And with the help of the Holy Spirit there must be an effort to

* Lenten Lecture given at the Ateneo de Manila University Auditorium, Padre Faura, Manila, 22 February 1972.

adapt traditional morality to new perceptions and new understandings of reality. Since we share the human condition with all of its limitations there are bound to be exaggerations and abuses during this time of transition. But we know that Christ is with us and out of our human efforts the Spirit will gradually bring out the good even though some cockle remains, as the Gospel warns.

Personal relationship to Christ is key idea

Much that is new is not a newness that breaks with the past, rather it is a newness of perspective that should strike a responsive chord in our heart. At the very center of the new development in moral theology is a deeper personal relationship to Christ. It is concerned with interiorizing the law of Christ, with developing mature followers of Christ who serve Him in spirit and in truth. And it demands a much more personal response to the call of Christ. External conformity and formal, legal, juridical observance must give way to a meaningful involvement of the total person who really believes that Christ is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Modern definition of moral theology

Today moral theology is defined as the doctrine of the imitation of Christ, as the life in, with, and through Christ. Therefore its starting point cannot be man as might be tenable in the science of natural ethics. The point of departure in Catholic moral theology is Christ who bestows on man a participation in His life and calls on him to follow the master. Moral theology is consciously a dialogue, and since dialogue is only possible if God speaks first to us—and He does speak to us in Christ, the Word of God—it follows that the Person of Christ, His word, His example and His grace must be the very center of moral teaching.

That definition of moral theology is the definition of Father Haring, the German Redemptorist who pioneered the renewal of this branch of theology. Certainly an effort that is so much concerned with Christ and with His imitation should give no reason for alarm. It was as a matter of fact the very failure

of moral theology to center itself on the imitation of Christ which evoked the call of Vatican II for further development.

Failures of moral theology and discontent

There was a holy discontent with the way that moral theology was being taught. Moral theology had become sin-centered. It had degenerated into a list of do's and don'ts. External conformity to the law and concern with the accurate weighing of mortal and venial sin had obscured somewhat the main vision of Christianity, the person of Christ, and the imitation of Christ.

Fortunately, this discontent with the way moral theology was taught and with confessional practice came at the right moment in history. Our age is deeply concerned with the dignity of the human person, with respect for the individual over against the nation, the bureaucracy, the institution, the establishment, or whatever you want to call it. It is a very healthy reaction to the nightmare that was World War II and the decades of totalitarian regimes and dictatorships that made millions of people faceless and nameless.

Such regimes have not all disappeared, but the tide of history is running against them and there is no turning back. The Second Vatican Council noted that the living condition of modern man has been so profoundly changed in the social and cultural dimensions that we can speak of a new age in human history. And in this new age the Church insists that human culture must be made to center on the integral perfection of the human person and on the good of the community and the whole human society. Modern man's love for freedom, we might almost speak of his obsession with freedom, finds an echo in the official teaching of the Council, when it notes that the Gospel announces and proclaims the freedom of the sons of God and repudiates all the bondage which ultimately results from sin.

By virtue therefore of the Gospel committed to her the Church proclaims the rights of man. She acknowledges in great esteem the dynamic movements of today by which these rights are everywhere fostered. From these and many other

texts in Vatican II and in the social documents issued by the Church in the past decade we see the urgent call to holiness, the call to change, to make the Gospels bear fruit in holiness, to bring peace and justice to the world that is sick of war, and of the inhumanity of man to man.

CALL TO LIBERATION

The moral imperative of today is liberation, liberation of all men from the bonds of sin whether it is manifested in racial discrimination or oppressive injustice, whether it be found in the so-called free world or under a military dictatorship, for we know that oppression takes many forms and is not the monopoly of any particular type of government nor of any geographical region of the world.

In the midst of these cataclysmic changes in the world moral theology also had to change. Moral theology had to develop. The mandate of the Church had to be answered. The new society that is shaping up with its knowledge explosion and breathtaking scientific advances, with its so-called population explosion and the ever present spectre of hunger and unemployment, and with all the other changes that can even cause the downfall of governments, bring students storming into the streets, make the wealthy tremble behind an army of security guards—all of these call for profound re-examination of morality, its content and its manner of presentation. If moral theology, if the message of Christ, had been taught in the proper manner, would we now find ourselves in the midst of such turmoil? If the good news of Christ had reached the heart of the modern man, one wonders whether the world today would be faced with so much social upheaval.

A striking example of the present sad state of affairs is the great amount of writing on the morality of violence as a legitimate response to the oppressive injustice so widespread in the world today. That the Catholic moralist is being asked to justify violence is a grim reminder of the failure to effectively communicate the great commandment of Christ that we love one another.

The background of change

Behind the call of the Second Vatican Council for changes in the development and teaching of moral theology, there have been many other changes. It just did not suddenly burst upon the Fathers of the Council that something had to be done. Many things had been going on in the world of scholarship particularly in the field of Scripture, as well as in the wider social atmosphere.

In the past few decades unprecedented advances in *scriptural research* have given us deeper insights and a clearer understanding of the Word of God. Likewise, in philosophy there has been a great development in the new teaching called personalism, an understanding and appreciation of the dignity of the human person. All of this overflowed into the field of theology.

This is clearly seen in the final comprehensive oral examination in theology which is given to the students for the priesthood, where much stress is laid on the human person. For example, one of the listings for the examination matter reads thus: "The contemporary theological perspective stresses the personal, meaningful relation of man to the One God who is immanent in man's history in a non-objectivized, dialogical relationship as the Absolute, Transcendent Greater and Salvific End revealed definitively in Jesus Christ." Notice the emphasis: the personal, meaningful relationship of man to the One God. In another listing: "The distinctive Biblical perspective of God is characterized by the progressive Self-revelation, through deed and word, of a personal living God, manifesting Himself especially in terms of loving kindness as the One, Creator-Lord of history, and definitively revealed through Jesus Christ." Again, one notes how philosophy's personalism, the dignity of the human person and the stress on the person have overflowed into theology.

Grace and interpersonal relationship

Another example is the teaching on sanctifying grace. Until lately, we probably learned about grace as something we

get by receiving the sacraments. Perhaps the catechetical teacher used the example of taking vitamins, or getting an injection. But now the whole stress is on grace as a personal relationship to Christ. Acts of love make our interpersonal friendship with Christ grow deeper and more meaningful. Sinful acts hurt and weaken that friendship, that interpersonal relationship. The stress today is on the person. The sacraments now are not taught as we learned them no doubt when we were young: The sacrament is an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace. Today the sacrament is taught as a personal encounter with Christ. What we learned was not wrong. It was not heresy. But today we look at it in a new way, a way that our generation appreciates. It is a personal encounter with Christ.

Habitual orientation or individual act? Fundamental option

In our teaching about sin we might have stressed too much the act. We used to concentrate very much on the individual act. And we might say, *that* act is a mortal sin, and *that* act is a venial sin. Today we talk about the personal relationship of the individual to Christ. We ask: Has that act really terminated your personal relationship with Christ? When you acted that way, did you turn your back on Christ and cut yourself off from Christ? This is much more difficult to judge and the priest would be much more hesitant about judging it. The terminology too has changed. We talk about a person's *fundamental option*, his *fundamental orientation* towards Christ. And we say, if we are followers of Christ, that we have opted for Christ; we have chosen Him; He is the one that our life is aiming at; He is the goal of all our activities. Underneath our activities runs that constant permanent relationship to Christ. Admittedly, we do not always live up to it. Sometimes we fail; sometimes we hurt that relationship. We weaken it. But breaking it completely is another thing.

This can happen. We *can* turn away from Christ. It is an *option*. We are not forced to maintain our friendship with Christ. We can reject this fundamental option precisely because it is an option. Christ will not force us to be His friend.

He wants us; He loves us. He asks us to be His friend. He prays that we will be His friend. Still He does not force us, and we can destroy that friendship. But the effect of baptism and the sacraments, and grace, and even the culture, the atmosphere in which we live is reenforcing that constant effort, determination, desire, to maintain our friendship with Christ. So breaking it off is a very, very serious thing.

Sins of passion

We also look differently today upon the sins of passion, and the whole question of being carried away by the passion of the moment or the hour. As one of the leading writers says, if a person did do something that was seriously wrong but he had almost instant sorrow, instant regret, and he turned back to Christ, that proves that even though he did something seriously wrong, yet he did not destroy his fundamental option. He did not take his whole person as it were, into his hands and involve himself completely in that act, and break off his relationship with Christ. It was wrong, it was serious, but he did not destroy his fundamental option, he did not reject it. He did not break off his habitual orientation with Christ; he did not sin mortally, even though it was a serious sin.

Analogy of husband and wife

This is a different approach definitely. And if you hear it casually mentioned, you can be confused. The priest is often misquoted. But behind it is this whole new thinking. Some use the analogy of husband and wife. Husband and wife love one another and they are faithful to one another. They may have their little quarrels and their ups and downs but they love one another, and their fundamental orientation towards one another does not change in spite of these little petty quarrels, or ups and downs. But it is certainly possible if they continue with these petty quarrels, and they get more and more serious, obviously, to destroy their life and friendship, and they can break off their relationship with one another. It is possible, but it is not something that happens easily. It takes a long time. So we do not concentrate on the single act. We do not say that the husband and wife had one quarrel,

therefore they have broken up for life. We would rather say, if they talk about breaking up for life, there must have been a long series of previous acts that have been damaging their friendship and undermining their love.

It is much the same with regard to our relationship to Christ. It is not a single act that turns us away from Christ, but a whole question of our habitual orientation or habitual way of acting with regard to Christ. This actually shows a much deeper respect for the life of grace, for the relationship to Christ. This is the eternal God. And we are His creatures. We are made to seek, to hunger for God. As Saint Augustine said: "Our hearts are restless till they rest in thee, Oh Lord." Therefore to turn away from Christ completely can be done. But it is not a light thing, especially when we are talking about the sins that come from human weakness, especially, if we are talking about the adolescents or young people.

The adolescents: new understanding

Sins of passion in the adolescent are now not necessarily judged as mortal sins because of this new insight, this new understanding of personalism, and also because of what the psychologist tell us today about the meaning of adolescence. The turbulence, the uncertainty, the insecurity of the adolescent, the groping for identity, the struggle to integrate his personality—all of these things are deeply involved in these acts. They limit his freedom, they obscure his vision, they confuse him. Then rapidly changing patterns in the world today confuse adults: all the more do they confuse the adolescent. We have to take all of that into consideration. That is why the Church and the priest are much more sympathetic. But notice, the priest is not condoning, he is not saying that a thing or act is right when it is not. He is very, very hesitant, very reluctant to say it is a mortal sin, that it has cut one off from Christ. This is a very significant part of this new development in moral theology. However, if some priests would merely talk about the conclusion or the application of the new teaching without explaining the background, it could be confusing. If the children come home from school and talk about

the application, the conclusion of the doctrine, and do not talk about the preceding principles and their background, this can be misleading.

CALL FOR SINCERITY

This development is solidly based on our deeper understanding of Scripture, and our deeper understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ, to be baptized, to be established in a personal friendship with Christ. This is basic and fundamental. Today we are much more concerned with the interior disposition, for it follows logically from what we said about our personal relationship to Christ. This calls for sincerity. We are no longer content with *merely* externally observing laws and following merely external disciplinary laws, but we are all concerned now with the individual establishing and maintaining his personal relationship with Christ. His interior disposition is the main thing, not the external conformity, not the external act. We are searching for something deeper, more profound and more significant today.

Respect for law

But it does not mean, as some might say, that the external act does not count; that external conformity does not matter. Remember the words of Christ: "If you love me, you will keep my commandments." When they asked Him: "What are the great commandments?" He said: "All the commandments are summed up in these two: Love God and love your neighbor. And you must love them with all your heart, and you have to prove it in deeds." We know that Our Lord said how we are going to be judged at the end of the world. "I was poor, I was hungry, I was sick, and you took care of me. Therefore come ye into the kingdom of heaven. And we will say to Him as Our Lord told us we would: When did we see *you* sick and hungry and poor, and we took care of *you*? And Our Lord will say: Whenever you did it to the least of these my little ones you did it to Me."

That is the true following of Christ. That is loving Christ in our neighbor, seeking Him in our neighbor, respecting the dignity of the person who is so closely connected with Christ that if we hurt him, we hurt Christ. If we despise him, we despise Christ; if we hate our neighbor, we are hating Christ. Granted that we might hate something that our neighbor does. We might hate the way he robs or kills or steals or pushes dope or leads people into sin. We can hate that. But we cannot hate our *neighbor*.

Minimizing externals: indulgences

This emphasis on the interior disposition never contradicts respect for external law. There has to be some external law. But even the Church is minimizing her external law. The Church is insistent that the interior spirit is more important than the external law. This is already taught officially by the Church. It is not merely a question of the theologians now. Take, for example, the question of indulgences today. The Church has officially changed her teaching to say that the amount of indulgence will not be specified anymore. When we do certain acts prescribed by the Church and there is an indulgence connected with them the amount of indulgence which is obtained is dependent on the interior disposition of the person. It is vague. But it is much more genuine, much more meaningful. And in this whole new development of theology many things are vaguer and more uncertain. Before we were sure. We were too sure of too many things. We made too many things definitely black and definitely white.

If we reflect on a personal relationship with Christ as a friend, we can ask how deep is the friendship? Is the friendship weakened? Is the friendship destroyed? When we start thinking in those categories we agree that this is not going to be easy to make it something black and white as we did too easily before. Neither are we going to ask, "How far can I go before I commit mortal sin?" That is *not* the question that a friend asks concerning a friendship.

Fast and abstinence updated

Another example. In the whole question of fast and abstinence the Church modified her teaching, and changed the orientation and the emphasis. Now the Church says the main thing is that we do penance. The number of days of fast and abstinence are left almost entirely up to the bishops of each area to let them decide what would be best for the people. The Church wants to emphasize the spirit of penance. Let the individual practice penance. And do not talk about mortal sin too easily as we did before.

The shift, then, is to the individual and the interior disposition. The Church now states officially in her law that only *substantial* violation of the law is serious sin. Now when we have so few days, only two days of fasting and abstinence in the Philippines, it is very, very hard to see just what would be substantial violation of the law. How can we talk about substantial violation of the law which occurs only on two days in a year? But the Church is not concerned with measuring sins exactly when it comes to Church law of this type. When the problem of the day is revolution and injustice the Church is not going to concentrate on ounces of food! The Church is worried about our interior disposition, that we be sorry for offending and/or neglecting our neighbor who often has to fast and abstain every day of his life!

Marriage annulments today

Still another example of change and development is in the matter of marriage annulments. The Church is much more concerned today with the question of the interpersonal relationship between the spouses. The emphasis is no longer on the merely juridical and the legal and canonical. There is always respect for these, but today the Church listens also to the psychologist and the psychiatrist. And the Church has incorporated their insights and their understandings into its understanding of marriage.

Some of the most beautiful things ever said in the history of the Church about marriage are in Vatican II. In the teach-

ing of Pope Paul VI, in the positive part of his encyclical on birth control, *Humanae Vitae*, we also have some of the most meaningful expressions about the dignity of marriage and the dignity of the interpersonal relationship. Today the Church considers these as something very important, so important that if one of the persons, due to a personality disorder is incapable of entering into this interpersonal relationship, even though they know what it is, even though they could pass an examination in it, even though they have a high IQ, even though they want it and say they need it, but they are incapable of fulfilling the demands of that interpersonal relationship, the Church will declare this marriage null and void.

Changes started in Rome concerning annulments

This practice started in the Sacred Roman Rota, the supreme court of the Church with regard to marriage cases. Once Rome began to declare marriages null and void because of this failure of the person due to some serious basic personality disorder that was present at the time of the marriage, then all the matrimonial tribunals of the Church around the world began to follow the Roman precedent, and also began to declare marriages null and void for those very same reasons, even here in Manila.

Marriage annulment procedure

Every diocese in the Catholic Church, according to Canon Law, should have its own matrimonial tribunal where the people can go when they believe that there is something basically wrong with their marriage, something that was wrong from the very beginning. They take the initiative and ask the Church to study their marriage for possible annulment. It is up to the people to come to the Church. Here in the Philippines there is a special arrangement by which not every diocese but every archdiocese is supposed to have its matrimonial tribunal where the faithful can go. Matrimonial cases are settled right on the local level. They are true tribunals. If the two local tribunals of the Church agree and say the marriage is null and void, then that is final and definitive. Rome does not even know about it because these tribunals on the local level in every diocese and

archdiocese the world over are authorized to act with their own authority.

What cases go to Rome then? When the local ecclesiastical tribunals disagree then the only chance for an affirmative decision is to elevate the case to the supreme court of the Church, the Sacred Roman Rota. That is normal procedure when the two matrimonial tribunals on the local level disagree.

We have mentioned these examples of the Church's change in indulgences, the teaching on fast and abstinence, and her actual handling of marriage cases and annulments to show how in the official Church these new emphases on the understanding of the person and their personal relationships to Christ have already become part of the new theology and morality.

DEEPER APPRECIATION OF THE PERSON

If we reflect on this teaching on the dignity of the person, we must be honest and say this is not a completely new development. The Church was always conscious and aware of the dignity of the person. Theologians of the Church were struggling down through the centuries trying to understand the three Persons in the Trinity. And the Church was perhaps the first organization or institution or group of scholars that came to grips with this great question of what is a person. But in our day it has become something more meaningful, more gripping, more demanding, more in sympathy with our way of thinking. Personalism has flowed into novels and into philosophical systems, and it has overflowed into the teaching of the Church.

New emphasis on the person in encyclicals

Take, for example, the encyclicals which have been coming from Rome since the time of Leo XIII in 1891, when he gave us his first great encyclical on the social order. There has been a steady stream of great and moving encyclicals from that day to this. There have been others before, but we are very conscious of them only now. When the Pope gives an encyclical today we know it is front page news around the world on radio and TV. We surely remember well in the time of Pope John XXIII when he gave his famous encyclical on "Peace on

Earth." It was so much in tune with the times that they asked him to come to the United Nations in New York to talk about this encyclical and explain it. He did not actually go but he sent a Cardinal as his representative to explain it and give comments. Why did this encyclical strike such a responsive chord in the human heart and attract world-wide attention? Because it stressed the dignity of the person, and it was so much concerned with the great problem of peace on earth.

Pope John shifted the emphasis from the question of the dignity of human nature to the dignity of the human person. And from that day on the question of emphasis on the dignity of the person has been, we might say, remarkable in the teaching of the Church. In the Second Vatican Council, for example, which lasted four years, if we read the documents in chronological order, we will see the Fathers of the Church, the Bishops gathered in assembly in Rome, becoming very conscious of this new emphasis. And the documents start to speak more and more about the person. Finally we will see the word "person" appearing sometimes four times on one page of a document. In the last sessions when they were looking for a solution to this great problem of freedom of religion they finally based it on the dignity of the human person; a foundation which made sense and yet something which was never apparent or so well appreciated before.

Human nature compared with the person

Is this such a profound change, to shift from human nature, which was stressed so much in other encyclicals and to place the stress on the person? In one way it is, and in one way it is not.

Human nature is what we all have in common. It is what everybody has. It is something which demands conformity and something which is concerned with absolutes which are based on human nature. It leads to a mentality which easily can say: Well, this is right and this is wrong for everybody because of human nature which everybody shares. But once we shift to the person, the meaningfulness of this shift becomes apparent.

Let us reflect: first, person is a much more dynamic concept, and as persons we have a personality to be developed which depends on us. There is at once a creative element. Then the person immediately connotes something relational. It bespeaks and demands a relation to others and especially the all-important relationship to Christ.

A person must be open to others, in dialogue with others, be community-oriented and concerned with other persons. To be a person also implies freedom and responsibility. Above all, every person is unique. Human nature is what we share with everyone else. We all have basically the same fundamental nature but every person is unique. We are unique in our temperaments, our heredity, our talents, our background, the call that we get from Christ. The call is tailored, as it were, to our background, our ability to respond.

The person is unique

Therefore our response in love to Christ is unique as is the working of the Spirit in each of us. Each one has his charism, his own contribution to make to others, to the common good. But this is not to say that each one of us is so unique that we are a rule and law unto ourselves. We must be related to others, community-oriented, concerned with other people. We must love them, be in dialogue with them. And our fundamental orientation must be towards Christ, the greatest person of all.

We are persons. We are not merely spirits. We are not merely disembodied spirits, souls; we are not angels. We are bodies informed with souls, ensouled beings, who belong to a community which must worship God as members of that community, openly, externally, with public prayers and supplication. As a result the emphasis today on the liturgical aspect of life, on the updating of the liturgy, is a great part of our renewal. It is the moral man who responds to Christ, as a member of a community, manifesting openly his relationship to his creator.

Our ultimate orientation

The question of being oriented towards Christ, in having our final end and meaning in Christ, (our eschatological orientation) is also all-important. This life is going to fade away and our ultimate destiny is not in this world. But do not neglect this world; we are very much concerned with it, as Vatican II insists. But our ultimate goal is the world to come.

HISTORICITY OF MAN

Another important element in the development of moral theology is the historical aspect, the historicity of man. The fact is that cultures advance, the people mature, become more sophisticated. The level of education of the common people rises, and their expectations. They demand a voice in government, demand a voice in their own future. The Church appreciates this, teaches it, insists on it, and moral theology must reflect it, if it wishes to be relevant.

St. Paul and slavery

Since the Church shares in the human condition, it also grows in insight and understanding. For example, take the question of slavery. St. Paul in his epistles, did not tell the slaves that their condition was inhuman, against their dignity as persons. Nor did he tell them that they should rise up against their masters. He does not say that the government should suppress slavery. In his culture, in his historical situation he saw slavery as something that could not be resisted nor uprooted. So he told the slaves to try to find Christ in their master and to serve Him that way. Today the world is practically free from slavery and the teaching of the Bible is no longer relevant on that matter.

Capital punishment

In the same way today the whole attitude towards capital punishment is changing. The world is slowly turning away from capital punishment, and many governments are saying they will no longer put people to death, no matter what crime they commit. It is a question of the dignity of the human

person. Some say that even being involved in putting others to death is beneath human dignity. It is just another example of how the world has been growing more aware of the dignity of the human person.

Morality of war

War and its morality offer another example. The theologians, of course, were always against war. It is against the teaching of Christ. But the theologians were forced to talk about how to justify this or that war. Today the whole world is sick of war. Almost everyone is talking about peace and how to secure peace. There is little talk about justifying *any* war.

Sexual love and marriage

The question of sexual love and marriage is another important area of life wherein new insights have modified moral teaching. The Church has become a victim of its enemies—the Manichaeans, and the stoics, the gnostics, and different heretics in the early centuries of the Church. As a result the Church over-reacted and some of the great teachings of Christ and St. Paul were obscured. This led to an oversight of the Church's teaching on the dignity of sexual love and marriage. But it was always there in the Bible and in the liturgy. Today it has been brought forth anew in the teaching of Vatican II, and Pope Paul VI, in the most beautiful expressions that the Church has ever used.

These are just little examples. Maybe I should not say little, but striking examples of the way the Church has grown in her understanding of Christ's teaching, and how the Church realizes that it can be a victim of certain historical and cultural factors. But the Holy Spirit is always at work to correct distortions, to restore balance.

Nature of the church

Even with regard to such a basic question as the very nature of the Church itself, historical conditions can cause distortions. Up until Vatican II recent centuries had put great stress

on the hierarchical, the popes, the bishops, the pastors. They were the primary and principal members of the Church while the laity, the vast majority, the millions and millions of Catholics, were considered more or less down at the bottom of the ladder. The stress was on juridical, the canonical; emphasis was on authority and obedience. The laity were just allowed to participate in the apostolate of the hierarchy. The Church was very highly centralized; everything came down from above.

But in Vatican II the emphasis became more scriptural, with an awareness of the Church as the people of God, the expression we hear so often today. The Church is a Pilgrim Church, always to be reformed as it goes on its pilgrim way down through the centuries. Authority is not an end in itself but it is for service to the people of God. The Church is the little flock; here is humility, not a spirit of triumphalism, with real humility running through the whole understanding of the Church by those in positions of authority. There is also a feeling of democracy, and a demand for dialogue. We have parish councils where everybody should have some say in the running of the Church. We have a senate of the priests instituted around the world for their own work, their service of God. The laity have their own apostolate, and the Holy Spirit works through individuals. They may have their own gift of the Holy Spirit, their own prophetic charisms. As a result of all of these new emphases and new insights, we stress much more the freedom of conscience, the personal, interior response of the individual to the call of Christ.

Role of the laity

The Second Vatican Council also said that the laity should not expect the priest to have all the answers to their questions. That is neither within his competence nor is it his responsibility. The world today is too complex for that. Thus, the area of personal responsibility has increased, which means that there must be an informed conscience. The individual has to take upon himself this intensely personal obligation to learn, to know, to search, to pray, to find the will of God; not just to

give himself to his whims and passions, but to sincerely interiorize this seeking and searching for Christ.

SUMMARY

When we reflect on all these things and read what is going on in the Church we see that Christ is at the center and we are much more concerned with our personal relationship with Christ. We are much more concerned with people. The renewal of moral theology is not a revolutionary change, not a complete break with the past. But it is truly what Vatican II has asked for. It is a development; it is an effort for all to search our hearts to ask whether we have been just going through the motions, external acts, just going to Mass on Sunday and avoiding meat on certain Fridays of the year. Have we been content with external formalities so that we missed the main thrust of the message of Christ that we should imitate Him and follow Him, and that the great commandments are not merely questions of external actions but that we love God with all our heart and all our soul, and that we love our neighbor as ourselves and we prove it in deeds?

Confidence and optimism

When we reflect on this, this is the central point of the development in moral theology, realize that this is the work of Christ in His Spirit, the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church. This or that application might be an exaggeration, or a distortion. It might upset us, but underneath it all is this main current that we are seeking to be more genuine, more interior, more attached to Christ, closer to Christ, deeper in our personal relationship to Christ. This is at the very heart of the renewal of moral theology. Therefore we can look on it as something challenging, something noble, something inspiring, and say: This indeed is the working of the Spirit. The finger of God is here.