
Creative Morality

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Nowadays, a good deal more is left to the responsibility of the individual conscience than in the pre-Vatican II age. We are more conscious that we live in community and that we have been called to salvation in community. 'But it has not pleased God to call men to share his life merely as individuals without any mutual bonds. Rather, he wills to mould them into a people in which his sons, once scattered abroad, can be gathered together (cf. John 11:52).'¹ We do not minimize in any way the deep implications of the fact that God has called each member of the human race in a very special personal way. But our living in community involves interpersonal relationships as well as community relationships, and as Bonhoeffer pointed out, responsibility is fundamentally a relation of man to man in varying human situations. 'The responsible man is dependent on the man who is concretely his neighbour in his concrete possibility.'² While avoiding the dangers of situation ethics and accepting the validity of absolute moral principles, it is here proposed, that in the past our moral theology was over-concerned with the legal aspect of the moral life. Its approach was too negative and too absolute – seemingly unmindful of the fact that tradition always accepted a certain relative moralism in everyday living. The well-known scriptural scholar, C. H. Dodd, writing of the Church at the time of the New Testament, has the following: 'The ethical teaching of the early Church, we have seen, falls into a scheme of practical precepts for everyday living, a scheme based on a realistic recognition of the structure as it then

1. Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity, no. 3. The quotations from the Vatican decrees are taken from *The Documents of Vatican II*, general editor, W. A. Abbott, S.J.

2. BONHOEFFER, *Ethics* (SCM Press Ltd., 1955).

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was, and following in general outline the patterns of ethical teaching which were being set forth by teachers of other schools.'³

In our approach to present-day morality, we must be careful to avoid opposite misleading trends. We cannot accept the view that truths of morality emerge from any political process such as consensus or compromise; neither are Christian moral principles determined by the dictates of reason alone. Individuals have not the right to decide for themselves what is absolute and morally correct; the implications of the gospel as well as its direct messages must be reckoned with. But we cannot continue to be guided by the legalistic methods of the past while ignoring the valuable insights of the present times. Today we live in an open, pluralistic form of society, a society that will not accept a morality based on legal uniformity. The adult Christian does not wish to evade his responsibility by mere conformity to the letter of the law. He prefers to take Jesus as his moral norm, his model and his criterion for authenticity. He rejects any kind of moral infantilism as unbecoming the dignity of the human person. He must stir up and exercise an inner sense of responsibility that takes account of the total human situation as it arises in his daily life. 'Every Christian must become active and interested in the welfare of others, supporting the spiritual mission of the Church. Every conscience must be stirred by an inner sense of responsibility and heed the inner life of the Christian call, saying: it is up to me, it is also up to me to do something for God's kingdom.'⁴ Man has 'come of age' in an evolving world. The moral teaching of Jesus with its openness and potentiality for continual growth challenges man to a creative, responsible morality. In the present age of technology and science there are stimulating opportunities to implement the biblical message to subdue the earth. God asks for our responsible co-operation in forming the new heaven and the new earth of the gospel.

By means of divine revelation God communicated with man and sought a love relationship with him. Man has been asked for a loving response; his response when properly given will be a mature, creative, responsible one. 'This loving response is the supreme task of man's life. So human living and behaviour or morality must be described in the light of divine revelation as the living out of this relationship, as man's response to the divine invitation.'⁵ In giving the desired response, a certain note of spontaneity is needed. Laws

3. C. H. DODD, *Gospel and Law* (New York: Columbia University, 1951).

4. POPE PAUL VI, Address to the Laity, 23 March 1966.

5. McDONAGH, *Truth and Life* (Dublin: Gill & Son, 1968), p. 24.

and restrictions will always have a place in the moral life but the restriction that seems most acceptable to contemporary mankind is the one that naturally arises from reality. Such a restriction avoids creating forced attitudes and prohibiting tensions. It promotes the growth of authenticity while serving the common good. Social and personal authenticity are complementary and inseparable. The giving of the responsible response to God's loving invitation will demand mature moral judgments from man the responder. Now while St Paul formulated certain moral directives which are meant to beget lovers, he never lost sight of the fact that love itself was the vital ingredient in the making of the moral judgment. 'This is my prayer for you: I pray that your love will keep on growing more and more, together with true knowledge and perfect judgment, so that you will be able to choose what is best.'⁶ In a world where we must be involved and detached at the same time the words of St Paul are invaluable. For Paul, Christian morality was a morality of love and responsibility, as William Barclay has shown in dealing with 'The Christian Ethic in the Teaching of Paul' in *Ethics in a Permissive Society*.

Vatican II has made it clear that the principal task of moral theology is to proclaim and expound that each individual person is called personally by God in the redeeming Christ. Each Christian has been called to holiness; he has been privileged to receive a vocation (invitation) in Christ as has been pointed out in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (no. 2) and in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (chapters 2 and 4). It is basic for us all that the Christian's responsibility for creation comes from a personal response to the love-permeated, redeeming Word of God. In dealing with priestly formation the Council Fathers asked that the theological disciplines be 'renewed by livelier contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation'. They asked that special attention be given to the perfecting of moral theology with its scientific exposition firmly rooted in the scriptures. 'It [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.'⁷ Words like 'vocation' and 'call' in the Vatican II documents indicate the responsive character of Christlike morality. We would not be seeking God unless he had first sought us and loved us; he loved us even unto the death of his own Son on the cross. Invitation and response imply something above and

6. Philippians 1:9-10.

7. Decree on Priestly Formation, no. 16.

beyond mere dialogue. 'This concept of Christian morality as a dialogue, a morality of response, seems to make it desirable that the faithful should be conscious of, or should deliberately advert to, the responsive character of their moral conduct.'⁸

While stressing the dignity and the privilege of each one's individual call we must also bear in mind that more than an individual ethic is required for the giving of an authentic, responsible moral response. 'Let everyone consider it his sacred obligation to count social necessities among the primary duties of modern man, and to pay heed to them.'⁹ The Council has issued a challenge to modern man to become 'men who are truly new and artisans of a new humanity'. In the past we tended to see God as an unchanging and unchangeable impersonal deity who arranged and directed human affairs from a far distance. Today such a view is no longer acceptable and we prefer to put the emphasis on the biblical image of a God who is personally involved in his created world and its inhabitants. Our universe is bound together by communicative relationships; it is a universe which evolves and develops into a creative unity by means of contact relationships with a personally interested God. The classicist approach which viewed the world as static, immutable and unchanging is yielding place to what may be called the historical approach which views the world as dynamic, changing and evolving. The implications arising from the historical approach have caused philosophers to re-examine Platonic thought; likewise they demand that we re-examine our past presentation of morality. Communication is an integral part of socialization and as such we must take account of its function in the integration of our moral behaviour.

A more enlightened understanding of the word 'vocation' will urge the conscientious Christian to employ his abilities and any stewardship that he may possess to engage in humanizing and liberating activities for the welfare of mankind. He will need a knowledge of Christ as a community-creator; each Christian is formed in his moral activity by his knowledge and love of Christ. Christianity is an adult religion, a way of life, that should be intelligently understood and lived by mature responsible human persons. It stresses what is important and essential without ignoring what is secondary and accidental. It brings home to us that it is God who saves though he does demand the co-operation of the

8. FUCHS, *Human Values and Christian Morality* (Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1970), p. 13.

9. Decree on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, no. 30.

human person. In exercising creative, responsible morality we will be exercising a role that will provide a way for self-verification and self-actualization that was denied to others in the past who had to act in conformity with a mere code of conduct. The world is no longer looked upon with suspicion as if it were more closely connected with the devil than its creator. Both creatures and creation should bring us close to God. A positive outgoing morality that respects others as individual persons whom God has called into salvation history at the same period as ourselves is essential for responsible activity. As we maturely accept our God-given responsibilities in life so will our potentialities for growing in divine love and of transmitting that love to others increase. In loving others we should be careful that we love them for themselves, so that our transmission of God's love will be truly authentic. After all, the distinctive trait in the moral teaching of Jesus is founded on the unified link connecting the love of God and of our neighbour.

Ethicists have proposed three guiding patterns of ethical models which flow from the basic understanding of the structural blue-prints of the moral life, namely, teleological, deontological and responsibility ethics. Here we are not concerned with either teleological ethics which bases the ethical model fundamentally in terms of the end, or deontological ethics which bases ethics primarily on duties and obligations; rather we are concerned with responsibility ethics which evolves from the notion of man as offering the free response in the varying human relationships that arise in daily living. Recent exegetical studies have brought increased support for the model of relationality and responsibility in Catholic moral theology as has been pointed out by Charles Curran in his book, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue*. 'The scriptural renewal not only emphasised the primacy of the relationality motif but also argued against the primary insistence on either the teleological or deontological models in Christian ethics.'¹⁰ However, in our interpretation and application of scripture in forming our moral lives we have to take account of inevitable cultural and historical influences that beget time-conditioned restrictions. We mention one important example that is relevant for problems in social morality; these problems did not arise during the life of Christ on earth as they do today. 'Jesus no more intended to change the social system than he did the political

10. CURRAN, *Catholic Moral Theology in Dialogue* (Notre Dame: Fides Publishers, Inc., 1972), p. 30.

order. He never assumed a definite attitude on economic and social problems.¹¹ We have picked on the field of social morality as it is of vital importance in a world that is plagued with hunger, disease and discontent in far too many areas. The Christian conscience while relying on the gospel for its fundamental foundation must also respect the human situation as it presents itself in each milieu.

In putting forward the notion of creative responsible morality, there is need for a proper understanding of freedom. Contemporary society makes much use of the word. There has been much fresh thinking in regard to freedom and responsibility just as in regard to authority and obedience. This is in accordance with the wishes of Vatican II. Philosophers, politicians and sociologists are placing more emphasis on the worth and dignity of the human person with consequent repercussions in regard to the concepts of freedom, responsibility, authority and obedience. Unfortunately, some tend to confuse freedom with anarchy, with an unhealthy subjectivism, with a self-will that would ignore the demands of lawful authority. Perhaps we can say that freedom leaves one open to spontaneously develop his human God-given potentialities under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In writing to the Corinthians, St Paul pointed out that freedom accompanies the spirit of the Lord. 'And where the Spirit of the Lord is present, there is freedom.'¹² The person who is truly free abandons himself to the action of the sanctifying Spirit. He lives above and beyond institutions and legal codes. While using his own freedom he respects the freedom of others; he develops an outgoing, loving concern about their welfare. Inordinate self-love and adherence to enslaving, minimal morality will gradually disappear from his Christian way of life. He will be more concerned with the theological virtues than paying excessive homage to the moralistic ones. The paschal mystery, the trinitarian indwelling, the mystical body, and the primacy of charity in realistic moral theology will be efficacious meaningful concepts in daily living. The responsible, creative moralist of the present day will be less concerned with the unbending, rigoristic attitudes of the earlier theologians who placed inordinate stress on law and duty.

Responsible morality under the light of the Holy Spirit will not involve any clash with our post-Vatican II Church. It is the same Spirit who enlightens the individual Christian and his Church. The

11. SCHNACKENBURG, *The Moral Teaching of the New Testament* (Freiburg: Herder), p. 122.

12. 2 Cor. 3:17.

Church was founded by Christ so that it might establish a loving solidarity with the world and its citizens while at the same time upholding a secure self-identity against the world taken in a pejorative sense. It has a calling to enkindle the light of hope and healthy criticism which invigorate history flowing onwards towards its destination in the covenanted kingdom of God's freedom and fatherly love, the kingdom where freedom, justice, peace and love abound for all time. The Church is the people of God embracing the faithful united together with Christ and one another in the mystical body. The activities of the responsible moralist based on truth and love should bring him into union with the Church and its authority because authority is founded on truth and loving service. Truth determines authority; it is not authority that determines truth. Nobody has a monopoly of the Holy Spirit; each of us must listen with docility to his voice. By doing so we will be assured that responsible authority and responsible obedience will reign supreme in the Church with a consequent responsible morality structuring the life of the people of God. Christians can find ample scope for the adequate fulfilment of their calling in the exercise of freedom and love while building up a better world through responsible moral activity.

In his book, *The Responsible Self*, H. R. Niebuhr pinpoints four traits in the concept of responsibility: the element of response; the here and now demand on the decision-maker in each particular situation; the necessity that one's response take account of the reactions of others; and finally that the response give consideration to our social solidarity in community existence. Of the four traits mentioned the one of response must be regarded as the basic one – response to God's loving invitation and response to other persons in community living. In giving this responsible response, we will be living authentic lives. Authentic living postulates co-operation with divine grace and integrating ourselves in a responsible way into the community life of our fellow travellers in salvation history. Moral responsibility is not answerability or accountability for failure to conform to certain laws or standards. 'The trouble is that responsibility is too much thought of in a forensic way, as answerability to laws or rules rather than a response to people's calls and needs.'¹³ In the pre-Vatican II area of moral theology we relied too much on moral constraints to ensure that 'subjects' produced 'good' conduct. Such a method does not do justice to the dignity and authentic freedom of the human person as put before us by the

13. FLETCHER, *Moral Responsibility* (London: SCM Press, 1967), p. 234.

conciliar Fathers. 'Hence man's dignity demands that he act according to a knowing and free choice. Such a choice is personally motivated and prompted from within. It does not result from blind internal impulse nor from mere external pressure.'¹⁴

The acceptance of the responsibility motive as fundamental in our moral teaching will have far-reaching implications in the field of morality. Increased attention to the personal responsibility of man the responder to the divine invitation will demand greater discretion and maturity in our moral activity in our daily relationships in community life. There will be greater scope for personal initiative with resulting risks of mistakes and misunderstandings. However, these risks should not be allowed to act as inordinate constraints in our activities. Some times we forget that prudence is a positive, active virtue. Frequently it demands doing the right thing in the right manner at the opportune time rather than mere refraining from action. There is a good deal of truth in the remark that we are living in an age when we must be ready to make mistakes in public. Responsible acting will increase our incentive to discover the truth of the particular situation in which we are acting. It will require mature intellectual judgments combined with the capacity to evaluate the pertinent reasons for what they are worth without being unduly affected by the emotions. Certain absolute norms will always be essential in formulating moral decisions but any form of indiscriminate conformity to positive laws and collective modes of acting of a particular environment is not the sign of an authentic, matured, informed conscience. In his general audience at Castel Gandolfo on 20 August 1972 Pope Paul while stressing the validity of certain unchanging norms of morality arising from the natural law and the law of the gospel also mentioned the need for updating existing positive laws. 'We also admit that many changes can and should at times be introduced in the positive laws actually in force.'¹⁵

The traditional moral theology that so easily solved cases of conscience by applying laws and the teaching of the manualists to the submitted cases has gradually lost its appeal. There is a great difference between moral cases and moral situations. It would appear that there is room and need for a legitimate type of Catholic situation ethics, a type of formal, existential ethic that would respect absolute norms and fundamental Catholic teaching and at

14. Decree on the Pastoral Constitution on the Church, no. 17

15 Pope Paul VI in General Audience, *L'Osservatore Romano*, 7 September 1972.

the same time take adequate account of individual human situations and persons. The past type of textbook morality has fostered discontent; it tended to depersonalize living human situations into lifeless mechanical casuistry with a resulting stifling in the development of an adult personality. Just as the followers of Teilhard de Chardin accepted his view of the individual's contribution to the completion of the noosphere (that sphere of the mind in which all human minds should combine in their thoughts and become unified) so too adherents of a creative responsible moral system can see their contribution to this system as helping towards the perfecting of the completion of the mystical body here on earth. They are guided by norms of morality that are more concerned with becoming rather than in being; they appreciate that the whole purpose of law in the life of the Christian is to serve as a herald and instrument for life and love, being mindful of the fact that the norms directing our relationships of love to God and our neighbour must be constantly checked and evaluated against the ever-increasing knowledge of mankind and the fluctuating understanding of social values.

Modern man as a result of progress in science and technology has the capacity for a greater participation in and co-operation with the power of his creator in the shaping of our evolving universe. Some theologians such as Karl Rahner and John Milhaven refer to him as a 'self-creator' and seek to understand him primarily in relation to his freedom, though Rahner usually uses the term 'self-manipulator' rather than 'self-creator' in his original German works. The term 'self-manipulator' or 'co-creator' seems preferable to 'self-creator'. While one can envisage man as a self-creator in a certain limited sense yet the term can give rise to misleading notions. The Church accepts the concept of man as a co-creator; she sees him as a created being who has been invited to co-operate with his creator in the shaping of an evolving humanity. Man is to a limited extent the architect of his own destiny; he has been called to actively participate in the building up of a better world; this call demands a responsible creative response. That offers a challenge to man in each situation in his life. Life questions man as to its here and now meaning. Each one of us has a particular vocation in life to implement a practical calling that requires fulfilment. 'In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human

existence.¹⁶ In passing, we point out that logotherapy focuses on the meaning of human existence as well as dealing with man's search for such a meaning, according to Dr Frankl's definition.

Traditional moral theology has been criticized as being an obstacle to the growth of human progress in the sense of positive development and evolution of all creation. An enlightened understanding and appreciation of earthly realities will show us that there is no reason why an ordinate use of created things should be an obstacle to union with God. The horizontal and vertical relationships of man are meant to be complementary when correctly utilized. Creative responsible morality should aid the expansion of human progress. A healthy invigorating understanding of man the responder in the moral life will inevitably lead to advancement in human progress. Responsible acting can be much more exacting than mere conforming to a code of laws; it will necessitate the offering of a love that will be universal and exhausting. Love is constantly making demands through the varying human situations that arise in daily living just as it demands the respecting of fundamental principles. Christian morality implies responding to persons, not to mere laws and codes. 'It is the morality of a believer and a listener. The new morality stresses this. It presupposes a God who speaks, a God who is creating us, has called us unto an unending dialogue with himself.'¹⁷ Complexity and freshness in moral approaches are a must in the revolutionized present-day society. These approaches should be based on love of God, mankind and all God's creation. Everything that God made is good and sacred. 'By virtue of the creation and, still more, of the incarnation, nothing here below is profane for those who know how to see.'¹⁸

In an article treating of morality some reference to conscience is needed. Here our remarks are brief and we refer to two very helpful articles by Dr D. O'Callaghan in *The Furrow* of February and June 1971 for further discussion. Though Shakespeare was no professional moral theologian, his view that conscience makes cowards of us all has deep implications for the moralist. Fortitude is a necessary virtue for those who strive to implement the desired renewal of Vatican II in their personal and communal lives; this requires the possession of enlightened, mature consciences that are alien to any form of moral cowardice. Conscience regulates my

16. FRANKL, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Hodder & Stoughton), p. 111.

17. MAGUIRE, *Towards Moral Maturity* (Paulist Press, 1968), p. 10.

18. T. DE CHARDIN, *Le Milieu Divin* (Fontana Books), p. 66.

moral activity in daily living. A correctly-formed adult conscience will constantly give a responsible response to the loving call of the heavenly Father as it journeys through life; it will be free and responsible in its choices as becomes the dignity of the human person. 'This holy Synod likewise affirms that children and young people have a right to be encouraged to weigh correct moral values with an upright conscience, and to embrace them by personal choice, and to know and love God more adequately. Hence it earnestly entreats all who exercise government over peoples or preside over the work of education to see that youth is never deprived of this sacred right.'¹⁹ Even when properly formed, conscience needs constant checking and evaluating against the changing needs of man in contemporary society. It is not just a moral instinct or the product of self-will that operates in a spontaneous manner; it does not function as a mechanical computer that renders service according to what is fed into it. Conscience is something personal that must not alone receive the necessary information but it must also evaluate the information in a responsible manner which demands the co-operation of an enlightened intellect, combined with good-will under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and attentive to the sacred and certain doctrine of the Church. After all, it is the individual Christian conscience that is the immediate and proximate judge of our moral actions.

We have tried to emphasize the value of a creative responsible morality which offers more scope to personal initiative and spontaneity and at the same time respects fundamental moral principles while remaining docile to the Church's teaching office. In placing less emphasis on law and more on love we do not wish to imply that law and love are in opposition to each other no more than law and morality are incompatible; though the words of Dr. O'Callaghan are worth bearing in mind as they serve as a corrective for past aberrations: 'One can indeed sympathize with those who have a deep distrust of the liaison between law and morality as it has worked out through history.'²⁰ The basic purpose of law in the life of the Christian is to signpost the road that will facilitate the offering of the loving responsible life from man the responder to the divine invitation. This response must be given by man in his concrete everyday situation, taking account of the findings of contemporary sociologists, political economists, psychologists, as well as the evolution of the social teaching of the Church as influ-

19. Declaration on Christian Education, no. 1.

20. O'Callaghan, *The Furrow* (June 1971), p. 351.

enced by human needs. Today there is much enthusiasm for human rights, use of the liberty of the children of God, genuine outgoing concern for the poor and suffering and for general improved conditions in community living. Many are calling out for prophetic leadership in this direction. I suggest that this prophetic figure will profess a form of morality that is creative and responsible, one who by the example of his life will bear witness to a full realistic understanding of Christ's teaching; one who will inspire us by his way of life so that we will as Christians mutually co-operate in the mission of transforming creation until it attains to the glory of the risen redeemer of mankind.

We are all not alone co-creators but also co-redeemers to a limited qualified extent in the salvation of all creation. The *fuga mundi* (flight from the world) type of spirituality, which evolved in early Christianity with the advent of monasticism underemphasized material values and the value of the earthly side of human life, makes little appeal to modern man. Likewise he rejects the Platonic notion that the body was the prison of the soul. Man has been invited to participate in God's plan for the transformation of the world and to play a positive role in bringing about the reign of God – a reign which has cosmic and social dimensions. The fulfilment of this role is best accomplished by the giving of a mature personal response to the invitation of Christ's love. Each one's degree of moral responsibility in fulfilling his role will vary according to the different circumstances of his life, such as, degree of education, social position, financial resources, etc. Let us be generous in making our contribution without dwelling too much on minutiae, and then leave all in the hands of the heavenly Father. 'For us Christians our degree of moral responsibility is indeed known – but only to Almighty God and to be made manifest to us in our personal judgment beyond death.'²¹

21. SEYMOUR SPENCER, *The Good That I Would* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd., 1967), p. 11.