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From the
Commandments
to the Virtues
– *Changing
Emphases in the
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VATICAN II AND MORAL THEOLOGY

In its Decree on Priestly Formation of October 1965 the Second Vatican Council enunciated the following directive (par.16): ‘Special attention needs to be given to the development of moral theology. Its scientific exposition should be more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching. It 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 official church statement at the highest level has been of major significance in furthering the renewal of moral theology in the more than 50 years since it was issued. It may not, however, have marked the very beginning of that renewal which had got under way in earlier works on the Christian moral life by such noted moralists as Bernard Haring, Gerard Gilleman and Fritz Tillmann.¹ Nevertheless, this declaration of the Council has had a very significant impact on Catholic Moral Theology. We may spell this out under five headings.²

1) It stresses what is positive and emphasises the attractiveness and inspiring nature of the Christian moral life. 2) In addition, it opens the way to taking the developments and changes in the course of history more seriously and so puts more emphasis on the particular and individual in moral as in all matters. 3) It facilitates a return to the sources and especially the Scriptures and

1 Richard M. Gula, *The Call to Holiness – Embracing a Fully Christian Life*. Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, NJ., 2003, p 60 (hereinafter referred to as *Holiness*).

2 Charles E. Curran, *The Development of Moral Theology – Five Strands*. Georgetown University Press 2013, pp 226-252. Hereinafter quoted as *Development*. See also Dermot A. Lane, Editor, *Catholic Theology Facing the Future – Historical Perspectives*. The Columba Press, Dublin, 2003, chapter 5. Richard A. McCormick, S.J., *The Critical Calling – Reflections on Moral Dilemmas Since Vatican II*. Georgetown University Press, Washington, D. C. 1989, Chapter 1.

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the early Christian moral tradition. 4) Pope John XXIII before and at the Council called for *aggiornamento*, a bringing up to date of the Church and its teaching and also its approach to and attitudes in relation to the moral life of church members. In this context the Church and its moral theologians have been able to leave aside the defensiveness of earlier moral theology and display a greater openness to dialogue with contemporary culture along with a greater willingness to dialogue with other philosophical approaches and with other Christian understandings of the moral life. 5) Finally, Vatican II's teaching moved moralists to criticise the Manuals of Moral Theology as being overly act-centred and negative. In consequence contemporary moral theology has come to focus more on the person who performs the acts and in this sense also moral theology today is more person-centred and presents a more personal understanding of the Christian moral life.

Another significant influence of Vatican II's teaching has been its call to holiness for all Christians, whether priest, religious or lay person: 'all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity'.³ This goes beyond the earlier teaching that such holiness was for religious and contemplatives only as they practised the Counsels, while the laity were called only to keep the Commandments. In addition, this stress on holiness for all helped to move moral theology today away from the earlier emphasis on sin and sinful acts to a positive stress on virtue and good acts.⁴

MODELS OF THE CHRISTIAN MORAL LIFE

In the context of the renewal of moral theology that has been powerfully encouraged and facilitated by the teaching of Vatican II moral theologians have begun to speak in different ways about morality itself and how to understand it. As Harrington says, there are different ideas as to what morality itself is, and each stands for some important aspects of it.⁵ Here we will use the image or approach or idea that some moralists borrow from Systematic Theology, namely, the image or metaphor of models. This image has long been used to help explain Christian mysteries and using it in moral theology can help to clarify and illuminate what morality itself is.⁶

In relation to our concern here it will be appropriate, valuable and necessary to focus on two of these models, namely, the legal

3 Vatican II, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, chapter 5, par. 40.

4 Curran, *Development.*, pp. 244-9.

5 Donal Harrington, 'Five Ways of Looking at Morality', in Patrick Hannon, Editor, *Moral Theology – A Reader*. Veritas, Dublin, 2006, pp 27 & 29.

6 William Cosgrave, *Christian Living Today*, Columba Press, Dublin, 2001, pp 9 – 12.

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model and the virtue model. By doing so we will be enabled to compare and contrast the pre-Vatican II and pre-renewal of moral theology approach to understanding the Christian moral life with that represented by the more recently developed and now more popular approach that we are calling the virtue model.

THE LEGAL MODEL OF THE CHRISTIAN MORAL LIFE

This model or way of understanding morality has been the primary and the dominant way of conceptualising and understanding the moral life in Catholic moral theology and in Catholic teaching, preaching and spirituality for centuries, in particular since the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563). The Manuals of moral theology in use, especially in seminaries, from shortly after that Council until the Vatican Council (1962-5) contain an understanding of the moral life that is an obvious example of the legal model.

Basically this legal model understands morality and the moral life in legal terms, i.e., in language and categories borrowed from the legal system of the state. So it translates moral experience into legal concepts and considers that this gives us an accurate understanding of that experience. So this way of seeing the moral life presents it, at least at the very practical level, as largely a series of laws coming from God, the Church, our human nature and the state, all obliging us to conform to them in order to live as Christians should. The impression was given ‘that living within the limits of the law is really what the Christian moral life is about’.⁷ In this context obedience becomes a central reality and virtue for the Catholic. This understanding of the moral life naturally gave a prominent place to the Ten Commandments, the Decalogue, and the six Precepts of the Church. As a result Catholics generally over about four centuries tended to see their moral living as doing their best to obey the Ten Commandments.

These Commandments derive from the Old Testament, the Hebrew Scriptures, where they appear in two somewhat different formulae, Exodus 20.1-21 and Deuteronomy 5.6-21.⁸ The tradition among the Hebrew people was that these Ten Commandments (or Ten Words, as they are regularly called) were given to Moses by God on Mt Sinai and were spelling out to the people how they, the People, were to fulfil the demands of the Covenant God had established with them on Mt Sinai.⁹ We may note that the

7 Richard A. Gula, S.S., *Reason Informed by Faith - Foundations of Catholic Morality*. Paulist Press, New York, Mahwah, 1989, p 27.

8 John L McKenzie, S.J., *Dictionary of the Bible*. Geoffrey Chapman, London-Dublin 1965, pp 185-188.

9 *Ibid.*, p 187; Donal Harrington, *What is Morality? – The Light through Different Windows*. The Columba Press, Dublin, 1996, chapter 2.

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Commandments that refer to the moral life are all negative rules: e.g., Thou shalt not kill, Thou shalt not commit adultery, Thou shalt not steal, etc.¹⁰ In addition, they are really only elementary moral rules that, as presented, would have to form part of any moral code and require only a moral minimum from the believer. As a result Catholic moral living in the legal model tended to have a negative slant and focused significantly on what we should not do more than on what we should do. This gave a negative emphasis to Catholic moral theology and to the moral lives of church members and helped to give greater prominence to sinful acts and sin in general in our Christian lives. “The focus of morality, then, became problems to solve and the strategies we use (principles or consequences) to determine the actions that will solve the problems.” This approach “turns the moral life into a series of “cases” requiring decisions ... we do not think of ourselves as living the moral life except when we are solving problems”.¹¹

This was added to by the requirement of Trent in relation to confession, where penitents were called on to confess all their serious/mortal sins in number and kind. So as a consequence of these developments the negative aspect of Catholic moral living was given prominence and the legal model served to re-enforce this and tended to cause the moral life to be seen in negative as well as legal terms.

Another feature of the legal understanding of the moral life was and is the emphasis on reward and punishment and especially the latter. Many of us older Catholics can well remember the important emphasis on these ideas in our earlier understanding of the moral life. We were made clearly aware in teaching and preaching that breaking a commandment deliberately was sinful and there was punishment for all such offences here below probably but certainly in hell or purgatory. So both hell and purgatory were presented as places of punishment, eternal in the case of hell, temporary in regard to purgatory. Not infrequently, the seriousness of the obligations arising from a law was exaggerated and hence, the feeling many had that mortal sin was relatively easy to commit and so was inclined to be a regular feature of the ordinary Catholic’s moral life. This approach caused us Catholics a great deal of anxiety and fear in our Christian consciences, so that it was hard to be at peace in our relation with God or in the course of our Christian living generally. Related to this was the tendency to become over-anxious or even scrupulous in responding to the demands of the moral laws in one’s life. Another danger, not always avoided, was legalism,

10 Hubert J. Richards, *ABC of the Bible*. Geoffrey Chapman, London, Dublin, Melbourne, 1967, 57.

11 Richard M. Gula, *Holiness* p 25.

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that is, obeying the law as an end in itself rather than for the value it enshrined and sought to protect and promote.¹²

Perhaps the most damaging effect of this legal understanding of Christian morality was that it brought with it and made almost inevitable a distorted and faulty image of God. Thus the dominant image of God tended to be that of a lawmaker and lawgiver. Going with this, God was understood to be concerned to ensure his laws were obeyed and so he tended to be seen as having a role akin to that of a policeman. In addition, God is here seen as a judge, who ensures the enforcement of his laws by appropriate penalties. Hence arises the idea of God as a punisher of breaches of the divine and natural laws. Not infrequently, this involved presenting God also as a kind of super-accountant totting up all the good and bad deeds people do, so as to decide their eternal destiny. One can understand that all this was conducive for some, not just to obedience but even to blind obedience to God's laws lest one be punished in hell or at least purgatory.

In presenting God in these terms a major fault was that the forgiving, compassionate and merciful Father that Jesus preached, especially in his parables in Luke 15: the lost sheep, the lost coin and above all the prodigal son, tended to be obscured and even forgotten. We may add here that a significant negative consequence of this legal model of the moral life was that it contributed greatly to the split between morality and spirituality. As Gula says again, "morality became too preoccupied with actions and left concern for the person to spirituality ... the divorce of morality from spirituality is rooted in a preoccupation with sins in pastoral texts and in the pastoral ministry."¹³

Of course there are values and advantages in seeing morality in a legal way. It scores very well in terms of clarity and it makes clear that morality is objective: it imposes itself on us and is, therefore, something we discover and not something we create. It is rooted in the nature of things and cannot be changed just because it might suit one to do so.¹⁴

Still, its disadvantages would seem to outweigh these positive points and that seems to be borne out by the way this model has in recent decades given way to others under the influence of Vatican II but also in the view of the majority of Catholic moralists. Two of these more recent models may be mentioned here. They are what are called the relational model¹⁵ or approach to the moral life and the virtue model. This latter will be our focus of attention in what follows here.

12 McCormick, S.J., *op. cit.*, pp 9-11.

13 Gula, *Holiness...*, pp 36 and 42-3.

14 Harrington, in Hannon, *op.cit.*, 29-31 and Harrington, *What is Morality?*, pp 11-13.

15 Cosgrave, *op.cit.*, pp 16-22.

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In short then, the legal model sees the moral life of the Christian as basically and essentially calling us to live in accordance with the Ten Commandments. Of course, it does not forget Jesus' example and teaching and the ideals and values they contain, but while holding them as essential for our moral lives, it puts them in a less prominent position. In practice, however, the focus on obeying the Commandments dominated the Christian moral lives of Catholics down to Vatican II. Hence, as Gula says,¹⁶ moral theology on the eve of Vatican II 'reflected a moral perspective that was individualistic, act-centred, law-oriented and sin-conscious.'

THE VIRTUE MODEL OF THE CHRISTIAN MORAL LIFE

While the legal understanding of our moral lives as Christians remains valid and of value, the fact that it has been largely left aside among contemporary moral theologians and also at the level of our moral experience and daily living highlights its limitations and negative aspects and calls for and opens the door for other ways of understanding Christian morality. One very prominent and popular model in this context is the virtue model. We will now focus on this view of our moral lives as Christians and explain how the title of this article 'From the Commandments to the Virtues' is justified and how putting the emphasis on the virtues in our Christian lives gives us a better understanding of the moral life of the Christian and facilitates a more balanced and more appealing way of conducting one's life as a follower of Jesus.

WHAT IS A VIRTUE?

We may begin by saying that a virtue is a beneficial characteristic of a person and indeed a characteristic one needs to have for one's own sake and that of one's fellows.¹⁷ Or as Thomas Aquinas said, virtue is a good habit or stable disposition inclining the person toward the good.¹⁸ The virtues are perfective of the human person.¹⁹ Or again a virtue is a character trait and is the disposition to choose those courses of action which contribute to one's happiness or flourishing.²⁰ In short a virtue is a moral habit that inclines us to do good. Our experience of daily living brings many virtues into play so that we tend to be quite familiar with a variety of virtues, even

16 Gula, *Reason*...., 27

17 Philippa Foot, *Virtues and Vices*. Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1981, p 3.

18 *Virtue – Readings in Moral Theology no. 16*. Edited by Charles E. Curran and Lisa A. Fullam. Paulist Press, New York, Mahwah, NJ., 2011, Chapter 3 by Charles E. Curran, 'Virtue: The Catholic Moral Tradition Today', p 51.

19 Curran, *Development*, p 85.

20 James G. Murphy, 'Virtue Ethics and Christian Moral Reflection' in *An Irish Reader in Moral Theology – The Legacy of the Last Fifty Years*, Vol. 1: Foundations, edited by Enda McDonagh and Vincent MacNamara. The Columba Press, Dublin 2009, p 302.

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if we don't often use the word. Examples are: fairness, diligence, truthfulness, justice, honesty, temperance, prudence, faith, hope, charity.

We can and do discern the presence of virtues in our own and others' characters and lives relatively easily. We often notice that a person is quite consistent in the way he/she reacts to situations. We can rely on them to make a certain kind of response in particular circumstances. They are predictable and seem to have certain stable characteristics that govern what they do. Examples would be: to tell the truth, to be kind to needy people, to make prudent, sensible decisions. This predictability and reliability seem to come from the person's commitment to particular values and attitudes and hence to be a firm disposition or habit in the person's activity and living generally. All this indicates that virtues are present and are directing the person in his/her choices of actions and reactions. Of course no virtue is perfect and so a person may occasionally act in a way that goes contrary to one of his/her virtues and so act out of character, e.g., a generally truthful person may offend against truth in certain pressing circumstances.

In the present context as we focus on virtue as an important element of our spirituality in our Christian lives, it is important to note two things: a) virtue is a positive reality and so presents us with a challenge to do good, to go beyond our present level of moral goodness and, hence, to grow as a moral and Christian person. For example, we as human beings and as Christians are called to be generous. Reflection on this virtue – and on the others too – will make it clear that we shouldn't remain complacently at our present level of this – or any – virtue but are called to strive for growth and improvement at all times. b) Each virtue presents us with an ideal and, hence, again, lays an obligation on us to struggle at all times to do better, to become more moral and so more human. These two points are very significant in our moral lives and are in deep contrast with the negative form and elementary nature of the Commandments in the legal model. Here, then, are major reasons for preferring the virtue model of the moral life over the legal one.

VIRTUE AND MORAL CHARACTER

One author expresses the core point here very well when he says: 'Virtue ethics is an ethics of character.' It 'takes the central question to be, what kind of person do I want to be? What kind of person would be admirable?' 'Virtue Ethics places one's own character at the centre of ethical reflection'.²¹ We may explain this and spell it out as follows. A virtue is, as already stated, a moral trait of one's

21 Murphy, in McDonagh's and MacNamara's *Irish Reader* Vol. 1, p 301-2, 304.

character, e.g., kindness, honesty.²² And all the virtues one has and practises go to constitute one's moral character, though whatever vices one has also form part of that character. In other words, one's virtues are the moral dispositions or habits or strengths that together combine to make up one's moral character. And because they are stable dispositions or strengths to act in particular ways, they give us the resources to do more easily what some who are less virtuous would find more difficult.²³ 'Virtue gives us an intuitive ability to see in the blink of an eye the salient features relevant to deciding what to do and the power to act spontaneously and fittingly without having to stop and think about what to do every time we do it.'²⁴ Thus practising the virtues builds up one's moral character and makes one a better moral person.

On the other hand, one's moral character manifests itself in and through one's actions and one's attitudes. Hence, one can read at least some aspects of one's own or others' moral character by observing and assessing the actions and attitudes that one finds in oneself or others. We can say, then, that one's moral character is one's moral identity as a person, one's moral self. My moral character, with its positive and negative elements, is who I have made myself and become morally as a result of my life experiences and in particular as a consequence of my moral choices and actions over my lifetime. This character gives one a particular direction or orientation in and to life and this gives us the moral consistency already referred to. And of course everyone's moral character is unique but no one type of character is normative for all.²⁵

To grow in virtue and thus to form one's moral character is a *lifelong task*. It takes continual repetition of the right choices to develop any virtue; practice makes perfect. Also as Gula says,²⁶ we need to have people of good character in our lives who can model for us what being good looks like. Such people will support and perhaps challenge us in our practice of the virtues and so by a process of observation and imitation we are aided in the formation of moral character. For the Christian Jesus is, of course, the supreme model and the Christian community of the Church will provide the greatest support, guidance and challenge to virtuous Christian living.²⁷

22 Stanley Hauerwas, *Vision and Virtue. Essays on Christian Ethical Reflection*. Fides, Notre Dame, 1974, p 54.

23 Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character – Towards a Constructive Christian Social Ethic*. University of Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, London. Fourth Printing 1986, p 115.

24 Richard M. Gula, *Just Ministry: Professional Ethics for Pastoral Ministers*. Paulist Press, New York/Mahwah, NJ, 2010, p 62.

25 Stanley Hauerwas, *Character and Christian Life. A Study in Theological Ethics*. Trinity University Press, San Antonio, Texas, 1975, p 127.

26 *Just Ministry*, p 70.

27 *Ibid.*, p 72 and 74.

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So living as a virtuous person indicates that one has a good moral character. Practising the virtues also leads to genuine human and Christian fulfilment or flourishing; it makes good persons. We may say then, that such good living enables us to make significant progress towards being fully human. So growing in virtue and forming one's moral character is something that humanises us, makes us more human, better human beings.²⁸ It is important to note here that practising the virtues and so building one's moral character is not to be seen as a heavy burden or oppressive duty imposed by some external agent, whether the Church or God. Rather it is the human and so the Christian thing to do. Doing it, as experience shows, is both a gift and a task: a gift in that one's very nature as a person inclines one towards these goals and helps one to realise them; a task in that it involves a struggle to practise the virtues in a sinful world and so to build one's moral character.²⁹

THE VALUES OF THE VIRTUE MODEL

These values will have been discerned in the foregoing pages but we may here highlight them more directly.

1. The virtue model places the emphasis on the person, the moral subject and so avoids an overly act-centred view of the moral life.
2. It emphasises growth and progress in Christian living and the continuing challenge involved in that.
3. It presents a positive understanding of the Christian moral life and so avoids any preoccupation with sin.
4. It sees the moral life, not as a long series of duties to be fulfilled and a list of rules to be obeyed, but rather as a call to fulfilment, to become a better person, the person one should be.
5. It makes clear that the more we practise the virtues and build our moral character the more we strengthen our inclination to do good and avoid sin. Hence, the virtuous person can be at peace and without anxiety about falling into serious sin in any regular way. However, we can always act out of character and so we need to be alert to temptations that will inevitably come our way.
6. It reminds us to maintain an open but critical attitude to the values and influences of the various groups and communities to which we belong, including especially present-day western society and

28 William Cosgrave, *The Challenge of Christian Discipleship*. Columba Press, Dublin, 2012, p 84. Chapter 4 of this volume, pp 76 to 94 is a reflection on 'The Virtue Model of the Christian Moral Life.'

29 *Ibid.*, p 85.

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culture. In this the guidance of the Church's teaching and one's own mature Christian instinct will provide both information and direction.

7. To highlight this model as a very positive and helpful way of understanding the moral life and living it out does not at all imply that we don't need the Ten Commandments and the other principles of the Christian moral tradition. These are, of course, essential as guidelines for our moral choices and for helping us to judge wisely what is and what is not morally right in the situations that confront us from day to day.

CONCLUSION

In the light of these values and others already noted in the preceding pages it will be clear that the move 'From the Commandments to the Virtues', as expressed in the title of this article, is very much warranted and that the virtue model of Christian moral living is one to be cherished and used in our daily lives as a positive and significant help to better Christian living.

Prayer and Transformation. Finally, and most importantly, praying the psalms in the context of regularly reading the scriptures involves those who do this in being changed by what they do: scriptural prayer is, we might say, a performative prayer, a thing we do. In singing the psalms, or reading the Bible prayerfully, we ourselves are most certainly doing something; but perhaps the more important dimension of this activity is one that is harder to notice and perhaps almost impossible to quantify – because as we 'do' the psalms, as we perform them, something is being done by the psalms to us. As I work on the Bible, the word of God works upon me. As I read the word, the furniture in the house of my heart is being moved around, or even replaced completely; my imagination is being reshaped in the image of Christ.

- MARK BENNETT, OSB, *The Wind, the Fountain and the Fire – the 2020 Lent Book* (London: Bloomsbury) 2019. p. 6.