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A JOURNAL FOR THE  
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

Bill Cosgrave

Responsibility  
in the  
Christian Life

July/August 2020

# Responsibility in the Christian Life

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The idea of responsibility is a fundamental one in ethics, in moral theology and in the Christian life. An understanding of moral responsibility is crucial for the participation of the Christian community and its members in the moral life we share with all of humankind.<sup>1</sup> ‘When we ask about responsibility we are asking about ourselves’.<sup>2</sup> We may begin by reflecting on this concept of responsibility, especially in relation to the moral life.

## THE IDEA OF RESPONSIBILITY

At the literal level the word means that one is able to respond to some stimulus; one is capable of a response to someone or something in the environment. This will usually be a free response, since our freedom is presupposed here, though some raise questions about it. If, in addition, one speaks of a person as responsible, one is referring to that person’s trustworthiness or dependability in some enterprise or relationship. It may also involve a reference to one’s mature or adult attitude in the various areas and activities in life. Having responsibility for something or some situation will indicate that one has been or is the cause of a particular development or state of affairs and one is committed to some value or values. A Christian understanding of responsibility is provided by Bernard Haring when he says: ‘Responsibility, seen in a distinctively Christian way, is our God-given capacity to make all of our moral aspirations and decisions, indeed all our conscious life, a response to God, and thus to integrate it within the obedience of faith’.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 James M Gustafson in his Foreword to Albert R. Jonsen’s book *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, Corpus Books, Washington/Cleveland 1968 pp v & ix.
- 2 Gustafson in his Introduction to H. Richard Niebuhr’s book *The Responsible Self – An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. Harper & Row Publishers, New York, Evanston and London, 1963, p 15.
- 3 Bernard Haring, C. SS. R., *Free and Faithful in Christ – Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, Volume 1: General Moral Theology. St Paul Publications, Middlegreen, Slough SL3 6BT, 1978, p 65.

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Bill Cosgrave is a priest of the Diocese of Ferns. Address: Parochial House, Monageer, Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford.

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### THE RELATIONAL MODEL OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

to set it in the context of our relationships in life and to make clear that we are persons-in-relationships-and-in-community by our very nature. This must be seen as an essential setting or foundation for our consideration of the moral reality we are referring to as responsibility.

Moral theologians today use different models to throw light on the moral life and some of its aspects and elements. So here we will consider the reality of morality in terms of the relational model of the Christian moral life. This will provide the necessary context for our consideration of moral responsibility.<sup>4</sup>

Human life and hence also the moral life consists essentially of a complex set of relationships between persons, whether individuals, groups or communities. We live and act within these relationships. It follows, then, that the moral life is fundamentally about persons in relationship and in community. It is in this context of relationships and community living that moral obligations arise and that the moral call is heard. The other person is a gift or blessing and from him/her comes the call or obligation to respond positively in the situation in which one is. This call or invitation is experienced as coming from the other person but ultimately from God. To that invitation a response needs to be given, a response that is loving and appropriate to the circumstances. So, being moral is a matter of being faithful to the fact of our inter-relatedness and to the demands of relationship.

In the relational model of Christian morality that we are considering, there is a significant effort to stress the social and not just the personal aspects of the moral life. We live in groups and communities and these have an essential moral dimension: moral obligations arise within them and moral responses are called for by individuals and groups.

The relational model also gives a lot of attention to the moral subject, the person or group living and acting in relationship with others. It is not adequate just to take note of a person's or a group's individual actions and assess these morally. We must also take into account what the person or group has become and is as a human person or group. In a word, it is essential to focus on the moral character of the agent, because that is the primary moral reality as far as any moral agent is concerned.

The relational model of the Christian moral life also stresses the historical or temporal dimension of the person, group and community. This refers to the fact that we all have a past, present

4 See William Cosgrave, *Christian Living Today- Essays in Moral and Pastoral Theology*. The Columba Press, Dublin 2001, pp 16-22.

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and future, that we live in time and move through time and in doing so change as persons, as groups and as communities, either by growing morally or sinking further into sin and diminishing morally. In addition, we belong to a particular society and culture and, consequently, we are socially and culturally conditioned. This has important implications for our moral lives as persons, groups and communities and for the morality of the actions we do or do not do.

In this context there arises also and naturally a stress on growth and maturity in the moral life. We are called to grow to the fullness of our potential as human persons and as groups and communities. Hence, we need to take a positive and dynamic attitude to ourselves and our moral development, not being content with being passive and static, but doing all we can to become the best person or group or community we can be.

### UNDERSTANDING MORAL RESPONSIBILITY

When we reflect on the reality of responsibility, we find there are significant aspects or dimensions of it to be taken into account. Responsibility is a relatively new word in moral discourse. It was seldom used in earlier centuries but in recent times it is very much part of our everyday language, especially in moral matters. It is an important concept and can illuminate significant aspects of our moral lives and actions and those of the Church itself and of society, its agencies and members. Haring even says that: ‘the central concept of Christian morality’ is ‘in the idea of responsibility.’<sup>5</sup>

Reflection on the word ‘responsibility’ itself quickly brings us to focus on the word ‘response’, which is central to the concept, as noted above. Here we are drawing on our experience of daily living and focusing on very familiar elements of it. Most of our actions in life have the nature of response to what someone else or some group has done in relation to us as persons. Whether their action is significant or not, we will very likely feel called to make some response that seems appropriate in the circumstances. And we will be aware that the action we are responding to was very probably a free action and so had a moral character. Our response, then, will be appropriate, hopefully, and also a free action on our part. Examples are abundant. They may range from responding to a friendly greeting to responding in listening mode to a sad and distressing account of a family breakup or to doing one’s best to share the joy and delight of someone who has won a major prize or is celebrating their marriage or the birth of a first child. Niebuhr

5 Bernard Haring, C. SS. R., *The Law of Christ – Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, Volume 1, The Mercier Press, Cork, 1961, p 49.

makes this point well (p 61): ‘... for the ethics of responsibility the *fitting* action, the one that fits into a total interaction as response and as anticipation of further response, is alone conducive to the good and alone is right.’ For the Catholic, of course, the moral teaching of the Church will provide us with the appropriate guidance needed to ensure that we act at all times in a fully moral way.

It is in the context of such situations that involve two people or groups that the moral dimension of our relationships emerges. It is in such cases, as noted above, that we hear the moral call, the insistent demand to respond in an appropriate way. In fact it is here that the reality of moral obligation enters our lives and calls us to make a response that fits the situation or the invitation of the other to respond. On further reflection it will become clear that for both parties there will be essential elements that may be categorised in the words of one theologian as recognition, respect and response.<sup>6</sup> This is certainly true if the invitation and response are positive. They may not be, of course, and, then, there will be an element of what McDonagh calls threat rather than gift involved in the exchange. It will be important to note also that the moral call or the feeling of obligation will be experienced by both parties in the relationship: each will feel called to relate positively to the other, though what happens may at times be rather different on one or both sides.

In this context Niebuhr emphasises that an important factor will be how one interprets the action or actions to which one is responding. He says (p 63): ‘We respond to these events in accordance with our interpretation. Such interpretation, it need scarcely be added, is not simply an affair of our conscious, and rational, mind but also of the deep memories that are buried within us, of feelings and intuitions that are only partly under our immediate control.’

This analysis will make it clear that in such situations there is responsibility on both parties in the relationship or exchange. It will be important to note that this does not imply that such responsibility is simply a burden or a problem for those involved. Often it will be the opposite as both parties relate together with pleasure and mutual appreciation. But sometimes there will be elements of negativity that may well prove burdensome to one or both parties. A lot will depend on the seriousness of the issues in the situation, the circumstances and the attitudes of those involved.

We may note also that the responsibility arising in such situations may well have an impact, positive or negative, on the relationship between the parties. That relationship is the context of

6 Enda McDonagh, *Gift and Call – Towards a Christian Theology of Morality*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1975, pp 40-43.

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the responsible exchange and may have a significant effect on how the exchange develops.

It may be noted at this point that an ethic of responsibility is a very positive way of understanding the moral life and takes a quite different attitude to the world and its activities compared to the very traditional emphasis on withdrawal from that world in order to achieve advancement in the spiritual life. Jonsen puts it well: 'God calls individuals to himself, not by calling them away from the urgent needs of social and civic life, but by summoning them to work within the world, redeeming and reforming its structures so that all persons might live freely and responsibly. The moral life ... is a response to God's invitation to live in the world ... and to enter into the solemn undertaking of redeeming the world in concert with the creator.'<sup>7</sup>

### THE DIMENSIONS OF RESPONSIBILITY

As already noted, an obvious dimension or aspect of responsibility is one's ability to respond to some action that has reference to oneself. One has the ability to respond to such action and this is normally a free response. This is a precious human capacity and a basic element of one's moral life. Because one can so respond, one has the human dignity of being a free and moral person. So one can establish relationships with other individuals and groups and of course relate also to God and Jesus our Lord and Saviour.

This dimension or aspect of responsibility can enable one to enter into and establish a variety of relationships with other people. These can extend from superficial relationships in the workplace, in a sporting context or in a neighbourhood to deep and enriching relationships in marriage, in family life or in the pursuit of common goals, values or interests. Here one will be responding from different levels of one's personality and strengthening one's sense of responsibility in regard to initiating and nourishing relationships on many different levels in the future.

*Accountability:* Here arises the dimension of responsibility that is designated as accountability.<sup>8</sup> This means that being freely responsible in these contexts involves being accountable for how one behaves in the relationship. Thus one is answerable for one's actions and attitudes in this situation and so may deserve praise or blame for one's conduct. Here morality arises and one's responsibility becomes moral responsibility as one freely makes one's responses in the relationship or situation in question. In this

7 Albert R. Jonsen. 'Responsibility' in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, edited by John Macquarrie and James Childress. SCM Press, London, 1986, p 746.

8 Niebuhr, pp 63-65.

context there arises another aspect of one's responsibility, namely, one's sense of trustworthiness and dependability. Has one shown oneself to have these qualities or virtues on entering and living out these relationships? In other words, has one been responsible in relating to the other people in the relationship? This is a significant moral question and provides a test of one's moral quality as a free agent, of one's moral responsibility in relating to others. We can say with Haring: 'one's response is one's responsibility'.<sup>9</sup> For the religious person one is accountable not just to other people but also to God. This adds a deeper dimension to one's life and activity and also a more demanding sense of duty and responsibility. In addition, it provides a new and inspiring call to open oneself to God and to respond with energy, dedication and love to one's heavenly Father. The model here for the Christian is, of course, Jesus and his response to the Father's call that brought him even unto death.<sup>10</sup>

*Revealing moral character:* The exercise of moral responsibility as outlined above will tell us a great deal about the kind of person who is involved in any situation and his/her moral character. It will likely demonstrate certain stable attitudes and qualities or virtues or even their absence, thus revealing who the person is morally and what values and ideals he/she is committed to and can translate into appropriate action in relationships. Thus we see the quality of the moral response of the agent and get an insight into the moral character that provides the foundation and the source of that response. We have here, then, a central element of what we may call an ethic of responsibility.

One may express or understand this aspect or element of moral responsibility in terms of *responsibility as commitment*. When one takes on responsibility in some relationship, group or situation, then it is true to say that he/she has made a commitment to play a real and active part in promoting the good and development of the person(s) or values involved. One, thus, commits oneself to do this and so undertakes to make a response that will achieve this end. As Jonsen says: 'Responsible persons conscientiously and consciously commit themselves to a task or form of life and readily accept accountability for its success or failure.' In so doing, he adds, 'the moral quality of a person grows out of the commitments made and stood by: persons form their lives in certain ways and come to be identified by others as responsible for themselves and their actions. So it becomes clear that 'responsibility is ... the basic ethical capacity of a person ... assuming the moral quality of the value and disvalue of his mode of action.'<sup>11</sup>

9 *The Law of Christ*, Volume 1, p 47.

10 *Ibid.*, pp 51-53.

11 Albert R. Jonsen, 'Responsibility', in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*. Edited by John Macquarrie and James Childress. SCM Press 1986, London, p 547.

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Here too the Christian will find the call of God in Jesus to be both loving and demanding. With the example of Jesus in mind as an encouragement and a challenge one will be energised to respond with one's whole heart and to the best of one's ability and thus reveal and also strengthen one's moral character and the quality of one's ability to exercise moral responsibility in the future.

Reflecting on this dimension of responsibility helps us to understand how and why Haring is able to say that responsibility is 'the central concept of Christian morality.'<sup>12</sup> Christian moral teaching, he says (p 52) "... centers, in grace-endowed fellowship of man with God, in the dialogue of word and response, in responsibility". He understands this in a religious sense, of course, so that for him the moral life of the Christian is basically one's response to God's word and love mediated through Jesus and the created world.<sup>13</sup>

At this point Niebuhr (p 65) ventures a definition: 'The idea or pattern of responsibility, then, may summarily and abstractly be defined as the idea of an agent's action as response to an action upon him in accordance with his interpretation of the latter action with his expectation of response to his response; and all of this in a continuing community of agents.'

### RESPONSIBILITY AND MORAL VALUES

In our discussion so far little has been said about *what* specific values, principles, norms and ideals are required in one's moral life so that one lives in a truly responsible manner. In other words, the moral content of the ethic of the responsible person or group has not so far been well spelled out in our reflections. This, however, will be necessary in one's daily life. Different values and principles will be chosen by different people and groups. For the Catholic person the teaching of the Church will provide the essential principles, values, norms and ideals of the ethic of responsibility to be adopted. While one approaches and interprets the moral life of the Catholic in terms of responsibility and in an effort to make appropriate responses in whatever situation one is in, these responses should be made in terms of a positive response to the Church's moral teaching as one has come to know and accept that teaching. However, for some Catholics today there are difficulties here. These church members will have questions about some elements of church teaching, especially on the moral life, and may find it difficult to align themselves with the official positions the magisterium has adopted.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p 49.

<sup>13</sup> See Albert R. Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*. Corpus Books, Washington/Cleveland, 1968, pp 91-92.



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As indicated in this reference to the Church's teaching and its role in our lives as Catholics, the ethic of responsibility does not dispense with moral principles and rules. On the contrary, these principles and rules remain valid and binding so as to provide moral guidance for Catholics and others also in relation to their lives generally and to specific moral decisions that they may have to make. See Jonsen, *Responsibility in Modern Religious Ethics*, especially chapter 5.

## RESPONSIBILITY FOR AND TOWARDS ONESELF

Each of us human persons has an innate and inalienable dignity that has to be respected, not just by other people, groups and institutions but by ourselves also. We can say, therefore, that each of us has a moral obligation or responsibility to ensure our dignity is respected, and also that one makes every effort to be and become the best person one can be, so as to enhance that dignity as much as possible. Essential for this will be a good degree of self-awareness. As one author says, 'self-knowledge ... is essential to the responsible life'.<sup>14</sup> In Christian terms we are all children of God, loved by God and called by God, not just to do good and live as true disciples of Jesus, the Son of God, but also to seek to become a mature and fully developed son/daughter of the Father and brother/sister of Jesus the Lord. Here is our primary and most basic responsibility as persons and as Christians. Hopefully, one can appreciate this and make every effort over the years to work to become the best person one can be and the best disciple of Christ that is possible for one. Here one may quote the following enlightening insights: 'a person's highest dignity lies in his responsibility and this is not to be diminished lightly ... A person may not be responsible for all of his characteristics, but he is responsible for the stance he takes towards them.'<sup>15</sup>

## RESPONSIBILITY AND MAJOR PROBLEMS IN SOCIETY TODAY

So far in this essay our concern has been largely with the responsibility of individual persons and groups in relation to their activities or their failure to act. Now we move to a broader canvas and discuss some of the problems that beset the societies of the Western world and the impact of those problems on the poorer societies of the world at present. In regard to moral responsibility this raises the issue of collective responsibility on the part of

14 H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Responsible Self—An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy*. Harper & Row, Publishers, New York, Evanston and London, 1963, p 16.

15 Bartholomew M. Kiely, S. J., *Psychology and Moral Theology – Lines of Convergence*. Gregorian University Press, Rome, 1980, p 246.

classes, companies and even nation states. Such responsibility is a complex matter. It is obviously a reality in our world as we hear more and more about the major social, economic, political and environmental evils that exist, in part at least due to the activity or inactivity of various groups, communities and even nation states in different parts of the globe. Our primary concern here will not be to assign moral responsibility for any of these evils. Rather we will confine ourselves largely to mentioning some of the more significant problems that our world suffers from, that are widely known and are highlighted especially by Pope Francis in his 2015 Encyclical Letter on climate change and related issues. Collective responsibility exists for these evils and it is mostly to be laid at the doors of Western agents. Being precise is far from easy in these matters and what is said in these pages would be very unlikely to have any effect or even come to the notice of those bearing the main responsibility.

We turn, then, to Pope Francis's 2015 Encyclical Letter, *Laudato Si'*- *On Care for our Common Home* about the environment and especially on climate change. Along with some commentaries and expositions of its basic teaching and its implications, it is possible to point out and comment on some of the major issues that dominate and damage not just the environment but also our society in the Western world and also the people of the Third World and their way of living. The Western world and especially international companies and many governments bear significant responsibility for the evil effects flowing from the present model of economic development that so dominates our Western society and impacts also on other societies around the world.<sup>16</sup>

In this context as Donal Dorr says, 'Pope Francis is very critical of the set of beliefs that underpin the economic system that is operative at present in almost every country in the world, and the fact that 'the market' is treated as though it were a god which must

16 See Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor and for the Earth – From Leo XIII to Pope Francis*. Revised Edition 2016. Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York 10545, pp 126-129, 183-185, 476-477. Drawing on the Synod of Bishops 1971 he says (p 184): '... it is not true development at all, but rather a kind of exploitation ... what is being directly exploited in this case is not other people but the resources of the Earth.' On page 477 Dorr says: 'Church leaders in all corners of the world must follow the lead of Pope Francis in insisting on the urgent need of a search for alternative styles of living and of organising society.' This book is a comprehensive and up to date volume on Catholic Social Teaching and its 548 pages are enlightening and very valuable reading for all.

See also Donal Dorr, *Spirituality and Justice*. Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, and Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1984, pp 62-71.

be obeyed at all costs.<sup>17</sup> Francis refers to it as ‘the deified market.’<sup>18</sup> In chapter one of his Encyclical the Pope outlines what is happening to our Common Home and where the responsibility for all the damage being done lies. It begins with pollution arising from many sources including fuels used for cooking and heating, transport, industrial fumes, substances that contribute to the acidification of soil and water, fertilisers, etc. (Para. 20). He mentions the hundreds of millions of tons of waste that are generated each year, much of it non-biodegradable, highly toxic and radioactive, from many sources including clinical, electronic and industrial ones (Para. 21). He goes on to point up the disturbing warming of the climatic system due to greenhouse gases released mainly as a result of human activity but aggravated by ‘a model of development based on the intensive use of fossil fuels.’(Para.23).The loss of biodiversity is another major problem today and human interventions, often in the service of business interests and consumerism, are adding to this damage (Para. 34). The quality of human life is being eroded by this environmental deterioration, caused largely by the current models of economic development and the throwaway culture of which we are part (Para 43). All this deepens the gap between rich and poor with the latter suffering the gravest damage from these economic developments of the present time. Thus Francis makes a close link between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor (Para. 49). One of the chief culprits here are the multinational companies who in the poor countries do ‘what they would never do in developed countries or in the so-called First World (Para. 51). In short we can make the words of theologian Dermot Lane our own in this regard: ‘modern late capitalism is one of the major causes of climate change ... The triumph of market logic with its ethos of domination and fierce competition is paralysing almost all serious efforts to respond to climate change. An economy based on a philosophy of exploitation and extractivism of the earth’s resources is running in the wrong direction.’<sup>19</sup>

Apart from the climate change effects we see from the above points that major responsibility for the social and economic evils in the societies of the Western world at present lies with easily identifiable companies and groups among us and also with the way in which our economic system is organised and operated. While

17 *Doctrine & Life*, Dominican Publications, Dublin, September 2019, p 25.

18 In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, para. 56 and also in *Laudato Si’*, para. 56. *The Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* by The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace 2004 states (para. 349): “Faced with the concrete “risk of an ‘idolatry’ of the market”, the Church’s social doctrine underlines its limits, which are easily seen in its proven inability to satisfy important human needs, which require goods that “by their nature are not and cannot be mere commodities...”

19 *Doctrine & Life*, November 2017, pp 45-46, 44.

efforts are being made on many fronts to overcome these deeply rooted problems, it seems obvious that there are many unwilling to change anything in the economic system lest it reduce their profits. And so Pope Francis can say: ‘we need only take a look at the facts to see that our common home is falling into serious disrepair, ... we can see signs that things are now reaching breaking point’, while there is no doubt that ‘the present world system is certainly unsustainable’ (*Laudato Si*, Para. 61).<sup>20</sup>

It is not difficult in all this discussion to see where the major *responsibility* lies for the damage being done, not just to the planet but also to vast numbers of people in our world, especially the poor in Western society and above all, the millions of poor in the Third World. We Christians can respond with Niebuhr:<sup>21</sup> ‘Responsibility affirms: God is acting in all actions upon you. So respond to all actions upon you as to respond to his action.’

Niebuhr also sees the perfect response and the perfect responder in Jesus (p 167): ‘he [Jesus] interprets all actions upon him as signs of the divine action of creation, government and salvation and so responds to them as to respond to divine action.’ In relation to Jesus’ whole outlook on moral living, our author affirms that ‘... the ethics of Jesus Christ, as the way of life of one who responds to the action of the universal God in all action, in whatever happens, is an ethics of universal responsibility. Conclusion

To present the moral life in general and also that of the Christian in terms of an *ethic of responsibility* is an illuminating but also a challenging approach. It gives us a positive and demanding understanding or model of moral living in present-day society. It calls all of us, individuals, groups and communities, to examine our way of living and as moral people to assess our responsibility for the effects of our activity on the quality of life in our societies, especially on those who are poor, and in particular, as Pope Francis insistently reminds us, on the welfare of the teeming populations of poor people in the Third World.

20 In this context a recent article in *Doctrine & Life*, March 2020 by David Begg, ‘Justice Questions’ – ‘Economic Apostasy at Davos?’ pp 36-45 is illuminating. It says in part (p 36): ‘In the film *Wall Street*, Gordon Gekko, played by Michael Douglas, remarked that ‘greed, for lack of a better term, is good.’ This is fiction but it reflected a value system which has dominated the business and financial world for the last four decades. It is the core value of shareholder capitalism,’ whose primary purpose is to make profit for the shareholders. Before 1970 the dominant value system was known as stakeholder capitalism, which was based on the idea that companies existed to serve the needs of a broader range of stakeholders – customers, suppliers, employees, and the economy – not just shareholders (p 36). ‘Companies today face an existential choice. Either they wholeheartedly embrace ‘stakeholder capitalism’ and subscribe to the responsibilities that come with it, ... Or they stick to outdated ‘shareholder capitalism’ that prioritises short-term profit over everything else..’ (p 38).

21 *The Responsible Self*, p 126.