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Moral theology a priority for the new Pope

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As the cardinals prepare to enter conclave to elect Francis's successor, they need to assess the state of the Church. One area deserving highlight is moral theology, a field whose renewal Vatican II called for (*Optatam totius*, 16) but which, for various reasons, has arguably been impeded by various fits and starts.

In searching for the next Pope, these are some considerations from moral theology I

propose deserve deep and sustained attention.

The Primacy of Conversion

Mark's Gospel, which lacks an infancy narrative and begins directly with the beginnings of Jesus's public ministry starts out with conversion. It is the leitmotif of John the Baptist's call (1:4), which is presented as already foretold by the prophets (quoting Isaiah in vv. 2-3). John's summons is repeated in the very first words spoken by Jesus: "The kingdom of heaven is at hand! Repent …" (1:15).

In contrast to modernity, Jesus does not adopt the perspective of Thomas Harris, summarized in his 1967 bestseller: "I'm OK, You're OK." The Biblical perspective is that human beings are *not* OK. They are not born in innocence nor, in the existential situation of humanity as it exists, naturally good. The Gospel recognizes that man is injured, damaged, warped. That is why Catholics affirm each Sunday that "for us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven."

One who does not need salvation—one who is "OK"—does not need a Savior. The erosion of the notion of original sin, fueled by Jean-Jacques Rousseau's anti-Christian optimism, replaces awareness of a need for a Savior with some idea of "human natural goodness" for which Christ becomes at best a kind of supplemental supernatural steroid.

This has to be coupled with similar weakening of a consciousness of personal sin. Popes throughout the ages, and certainly since Pius XII, have repeatedly emphasized contemporaries' loss of a "sense of sin." Deficient "theologies of conscience," which emphasized the subjective, abet this spiritual amnesia.

Against these perspectives, one must ask whether Pope Francis's "theology of accompaniment" gave due weight to the primacy of conversion in the moral life. The Church *is* and must be inclusive: her doors are open to all. But the focus on "accompaniment" seemed to accentuate the "welcome" *without the call to conversion.* As the late Cardinal Francis George was wont to note: "All are welcome in the Church; but on Christ's terms, not their own."

Cardinal George's perspective is Christ's: His word for conversion is *metanoia. Metanoia,* etymologically, means to "change one's mind." To be converted is to change one's way of thinking, to change one's way of looking at things, to recognize the world and its standards are not Christ's.

One seeks the Church because one realizes that one's situation is "not OK," that

there is something lacking in one's life, a void that *only the Church* can fill. One cannot sufficiently emphasize that the Church welcomes sinners, both because those are the only kinds of people the Church Militant can receive and because sinners are the current raw material of saints.

A full-voiced call to "accompaniment" accompanied by a much more muted call to conversion is not the Gospel. It betrays the Gospel. Encountering the person "where he is" is no discovery: it is the *only* place he can be met. But encountering him where he is without recognizing that everyone is called to something greater – without an honest call to conversion from where he is – does not serve the truth in love and is not merciful. The spiritual works of mercy do not just pretend that human sinfulness is a lack of knowledge ("to instruct the ignorant"). They also presuppose calling evil "evil" and "admonishing the sinner," not in hypocritical self-righteousness, but neither in a non-confrontationalism bordering on the relativistic, "who am I do judge?"

The Objectivity of the Moral Order

More than 30 years ago, Pope St. John Paul II's encyclical *Splendor Veritatis* reminded Catholics of the objectivity of moral norms. Both moral right and wrong as well as human nature have certain, objective ends, meanings, and significances. When those ends, meanings, and significances are evil, they cannot be cancelled out by good intentions.

This is particularly true in the areas of marital and sexual ethics, where the meaning of marriage and human sexuality is objective. The relationship of sexual activity in a conjugal context open to both procreation and mutual support of the spouses is established and indisputable Catholic teaching.

But while it is established and indisputable teaching, one must ask whether it received that degree of attention and reaffirmation during the Francis pontificate. Marriage and sexuality are not marginal considerations for most human beings. The average human being throughout history has been married and in a sexual relationship. The necessity for the Church to proclaim these truths therefore remains, in every generation, ever new. That is particularly true in a pan-sexualized culture where the dictatorship of relativism denies any objective norms for sexual activity beyond free consent.

In theory, few Catholics would outwardly deny the broader lines of the objectivity of the moral order. Instead, there are attempts to cloak as "Catholic" the giving of lip service to these norms while, in practice, eviscerating them. This primarily happens in

two ways:

1/ By positing sharp lines between "pastoral theology" and moral theology. "Pastoral theology" is really the prudential pastoral *application* of theological principles to the spiritual care of individuals. When "pastoral theology" morphs into its own discipline (not to say when one imagines theology as a whole should be refracted through a "pastoral theology" lens) much broader distortions occur. The most common is that moral norms, including negative moral norms the Church has always understood to be binding *omnes ubique*, become in practice if not theory merely aspirational. Morality becomes a target, something to be striven for, but not necessarily something attained (or required to be attained, at least in a morally culpable way).

2/ By subjectivistic approaches to conscience. Conscience does not *make* moral norms. Conscience *mirrors* moral good and evil. While the Church affirms the primacy of conscience, it does not propose that conscience establishes what is good or evil. The fact that the Church has always spoken of an *erroneous* conscience means that, at best, such invincibly ignorant persons may have diminished or even absent moral *culpability* for their actions, but it does not change the moral order itself. Yet a hyper-existential approach to conscience does just that: it is the objective moral order that at best becomes a theoretical (but in no sense binding) intellectual construct, while the actual conscience exceeds the Lamb of God in taking away the sins of the world.

One must honestly ask whether the ambiguous passages of *Amoris laetitiae* pertaining to divorce and "remarriage" (as well as Francis's proposed interpretations of how to apply them, using the "Buenos Aires" criteria) do not in fact depend upon this faulty notion of conscience.

Vatican II stressed the universal call to holiness (*Lumen gentium,* 9, 39-42). All Christians are called not to teetering on the precipice between sin and grace, ensuring not to fall in the wrong direction, but to "be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). That is the Gospel vision of sanctity. But, when conscience is subjectified and moral norms rendered in practice aspirational, does the morality thus generated in fact become in practice the pre-Vatican II ethic we supposedly reject: identifying and avoiding crossing the morally minimum line?

The Approach to Experience

A great deal of focus has been attached to "experience" and moral theology. "Existential" approaches to "meeting people where they are" tend to encourage this. It is

sometimes justified by invoking the Second Vatican Council, claiming that encountering the "modern world" means starting from experience.
That is not true.

Experience is neither good nor bad. It *is.* The question is not whether experience *is* but how it is to be interpreted? Because experience as raw data needs to be interpreted. It requires a "hermeneutic" to assess whether the experience is good or bad and what can be learned from it.
In that sense, experience is less a "starting point" than, more accurately, the data upon which a diagnosis must be made—particularly if we take seriously the truth about man, which invites him to constant conversion.

For the Catholic theologian, "experience" is and cannot be his point-of-departure. His point-of-departure is and must be "Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb 13:8). And it is Jesus Christ and His teaching – both those explicitly in Scripture as well as those articulated over time by the Church He left behind – that must be the hermeneutic by which experience is evaluated and judged. To borrow the American Protestant H. Reinhold Niebuhr's categories: in approaching the modern world, it is Christ who judges the experience and the culture, not vice versa. And we should not fall back from the word "judges," because Christ Himself tells us part of the Spirit's work as the result of the Paschal Mystery is conviction of the world "about sin, justice, and judgment" (Jn 16:8) on divine, not human terms.

The foregoing are the three global areas I believe the next Pope responsible for the Church's faith *and morals* must focus because I believe they grew anemic in the just-concluded pontificate. In the area of sexual ethics, I would note that this year will mark the 50th anniversary of *Persona humana* and next the 45th of *Familiaris consortio.* How much the specificity of teaching in those documents has been neglected – despite their broad applications as problems in ordinary peoples' lives – deserves pastoral focus. But recovery of that teaching would also be a function of addressing the three major areas discussed above.