
Rev. Servais Pinckaers, O.P., is a contemporary master of moral theology whose principal work, Les sources de la morale chretienne, was published in English as The Sources of Christian Ethics in 1995. Morality: The Catholic View was inspired by Sources, and has many similar themes.

Morality is a remarkable book. Although it is only a quarter of the length of Sources, it provides a rare opportunity to stand with a master at the top of a mountain and view of a grand, panoramic vista.

What is the vision that Pinckaers wants to show the reader?—that the Catholic tradition of moral theology is a rich one; that it has discernible patterns of growth and consistency; and that it serves the Christian life, transforming it under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and causing it to flourish through the virtues, of which the greatest is love.

Catholic moral theology is rooted in the preaching of the Lord and the apostles and in sacred scripture. It grew through the period of the Greek and Latin Fathers of the Church and then achieved a unique and culminating presentation in the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas. In the fourteenth century, nominalism caused a dislocation, leading to a moral theology based not on natural law or on the New Law of the Gospels (which leads to union with God) but on external obligation. One effect of this dislocation was that even commentators in the Thomist tradition have misinterpreted Aquinas along the lines of the obligation ethic. In contrast, Pinckaers' opening line stakes out his ground: “Catholic moral teaching is not a mere code of prescriptions and prohibitions.”

So Fr. Pinckaers sets about the work of renewal in moral theology. This renewal is based on the ressourcement, on returning to the sources of the Tradition and reintegrating them into the Church's life, a challenge put forward by the Second Vatican Council. Fr. Pinckaers accepts the charge of the Council, specifically, that moral theology be more deeply nourished by the teaching of the Scriptures and the Fathers of the Church ... linked more successfully to dogmatic theology and to the doctrines of the Trinity, Christ and the sacraments ... [and] grounded more adequately both scientifically and philosophically,
in order to ensure a more judicious engagement with contemporary thought. (2–3, referring to Pope Paul VI, *Decree on Priestly Training*, 1965, n. 16)

This renewal is far from historicist, but is rather meant for the effective engagement of the Christian in the modern world, bringing the light of the Tradition into the midst of contemporary life.

*Morality* has two major parts, titled “A Richer History than One Might Think” and “A More Difficult Reflection than One Might Think.” The first part presents the historic panorama. Chapter One, “The Gospel Sources,” begins with the first moral catechesis of the Church, offering the Sermon on the Mount and chapters 12 through 15 of St. Paul’s Letter to the Romans as the best examples. The sermon is presented as it was understood by the earliest Christians and interpreted by the Greek and Latin Fathers; it is the framework for the Christian life. It begins with the Beatitudes, the characteristic “blessed are…” statements. (These will appear foreign when the later obligation ethic emerges, since this ethic imposes but does not bless.)

Fr. Pinckaers also devotes significant attention to the text of Romans 12–15, which describes the Church as the Body of Christ, and the doxological and charitable aspects of a life animated by the Holy Spirit. He emphasizes in particular the moral teachings of the Lord and St. Paul in these passages, which provide guidance to a true life of mutuality, forgiveness, and love. He also shows how, in losing sight of these teachings, postmedieval moral theology sought scripture texts emphasizing obligations.

In Chapter Two, “The Moral Teaching of the Fathers of the Church,” Fr. Pinckaers continues with the thread of sacred Scripture as the “first and constant source of their doctrine” (18), adding to it the Fathers’ encounter with Greco-Roman philosophy as well as the “spiritual currents animating the Church of their day,” namely, the spiritualities of the martyrs and monastics, the ideal of virginity, and attentiveness to the Holy Spirit as the source of wisdom. A new theme emerges: that the goal of the philosophical ethic is the happy life, which is also the vision conveyed by the Beatitudes. This may come as a surprise to us, perhaps, but it did not surprise the ancient Christians, who found in the discussion of the happy life a common ground for evangelization to the classical culture. As St. Augustine says:

> How then, according to reason, ought humans to live? Everyone wants to be happy. Everyone will agree with me on this almost before the words are out of my mouth. (20)

What then, in classical Christianity is the path to happiness? It begins with the recognition of God as the greatest and most lovable good. Fr. Pinckaers describes the path thus: “to love God with all one's heart; it is the charity taught and inspired by Christ. Charity born of faith, therefore, will be the principal Christian virtue” (20).

Chapter Three, “The Classic Period of Western Theology,” is brief, but it gives us a glimpse of a peak in the panorama, in the synthesis of sacred scripture and the teachings of the Fathers in the thirteenth century, a classical period in Western theology. Fr. Pinckaers surveys a range of authors but gives Aquinas the most attention, with a brief but incisive outline of his moral theology in the *prima* and *secunda secundae* parts of the *Summa Theologica*. Here Fr. Pinckaers briefly flags something to which he will return later, namely, Aquinas's contribution on the New Law, which St. Thomas presents as an internal law: It is the grace itself of the Holy Spirit working in the human heart through faith in Christ and through charity … [a grace that is] profoundly interior through the depth of its penetration within us. (28)

A break in the panorama occurs in Chapter Four, “The Modern Period: The Manuals of Moral Theology,” with the rise of the morality of obligation. This period is much more thoroughly examined in *Sources*, but is described here as the time when the Christian theology of freedom, achieved through the excellence of virtue, was replaced by the
nominalist idea of the freedom of indifferent-ence, which posits freedom as a neutral start-ing point for moral theology. While the clas-sical vision was of reason's path to happiness based on natural law and carried to comple-tion by faith, nominalism reduced virtue to merely good habits; its real vision was the statement of law and obligations.

Fr. Pinckaers recognizes the help the moral theology manuals gave priests in the sacrament of reconciliation, but the prob-lem was that they did so by breaking with the received pattern of Christian life. Gone with virtue was the theology of the gifts of the Holy Spirit and the treatise on grace. The moral theologians of this period were, how-ever, responding to particular pastoral needs, and doing it well; they provided moral the-o-logy with a stable footing that held firm through centuries of social turbulence.

In Chapter Five, “The Question of Chris-tian Ethics after the Council,” Fr. Pinckaers affirms the spirit of a return to early Chris-tian sources following the Second Vatican Council, and turns to the hopes and struggles of the contemporary world. Here, crucially, are questions about the very basis of a Chris-tian ethic and the roles of the individual and conscience. Fr. Pinckaers notes that

in reaction against excessive legalism, there developed among Catholics in the aftermath of the Council a certain aller-gic aversion to law, which has shifted the center of gravity in moral theology away from law and toward personal freedom, the individual subject and con-science. (56–57)

But conscience as understood in the modern world is not the same as conscience in the classical understanding, where the Spirit teaches and leads within the moral order; rather, the modern understanding implies a separation of the individual from the moral order, based on subjective preference.

A significant response to the claim of ab-solute moral autonomy is provided by the encyclical of Pope John Paul II, particularly Veritatis splendor (1993), and by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which re-presents a recovery of the classical Christian moral vision in response to the call of the Council. Rather than a narrative of obliga-tions, the moral section of the Catechism is “Life in Christ”:

The Catechism situates the moral life in the context of the human person's natural desire for happiness, for which the divine promises and the Evangelical Beatitudes are a response … [and] restores the study of the virtues to a place of primary importance. (59–60)

In Part Two of Morality, “A More Diffi-cult Reflection than One Might Think,” Fr. Pinckaers shows the deep connections in the classical Christian vision. Chapter Seven, “The Holy Spirit and the New Law,” is a beau-tiful meditation on Aquinas’s synthesis of Scripture, the morality of human flourish-ing, and happiness in virtue. The sacraments, the interconnectedness of the virtues in every-day life, and the guidance of the Holy Spirit are explored as a great whole. The pri-macy of charity is elegantly affirmed:

If faith is like the root, charity is like the sap that nourishes the trunk and rises into the branches, the network of virtues, to produce the delicious fruit of good works. It is through this new love revealed and shared in Christ that the Holy Spirit works in us. (87)

Chapter Eight, “Natural Law and Freedom,” affirms that “the natural law does not prima-rily function by constraint, but by attraction” (97) and, properly understood, provides for the flourishing of the human person. This is far from a reductionist vision, in which natu-ral inclinations are considered subhuman, but is rather a vision of the primordial guidance of God, an invitation to the good for the hu-man person. Fr. Pinckaers goes on to explore the natural inclinations of the human person, specifically, the yearning for the good and the inclinations to preserve life, to marry, to know the truth, and to live in society.

This book is a gift from a master of theology. In addition to the clarity and poetry of the writing, each chapter provides pertinent boxed text, such as scripture quotations on “the face of charity,” a helpful list of the Church Fa-
thers, an outline of the structure of Aquinas’s moral theology, lists of the principal scholastic theologians and the great manuals of moral theology, quotations from Aquinas and other great authors in the Tradition, and a succinct reflection on two forms of freedom and morality. Fr. Pinckaers does a great service to Aquinas by locating him in the dynamic tradition of sacred scripture and the Church Fathers; this is an important shift in perspective that will provide Catholics with new access to Aquinas and promote further ecumenical dialogue, particularly with those in the Eastern Orthodox and Protestant traditions.

We can apply this recovery of classical Catholic morality to health-care ethics in three ways. First, in Catholic health-care ministries, contemporary issues have been addressed almost exclusively in terms of the casuist tradition of obligation ethics. While this approach has, historically, met particular challenges, the classical tradition can provide the authentic foundation of a sapiential, virtue-based response. This is becoming all the more necessary for the renewal of Catholic health-care ministries as lay leaders take the place of vowed religious, whose apostolates and spirituality derived from the classical morality so closely related to their charisms.

Second, in the medical professions, the language of obligation is increasingly utilized by physicians and nurses despite the foundation of the their professions on the virtue-based Hippocratic promise. Healthcare professionals can respond to the virtue model, as evidenced by publications like The Virtues in Medical Practice (1993) and The Christian Virtues in Medical Practice (1996), by Edmund Pellegrino and David Thomasma, and Becoming a Good Doctor: The Place of Virtue and Character in Medical Ethics (1988 and 1995), by James Drane.

Third, although American bioethics has deep roots in Christian ethics, it is emerging as a separate and secular discipline shaped in large part by the contemporary value of absolute autonomy. American bioethics will benefit from a renewed conversation with the classical Catholic ethic of St. Thomas, based on prudencia, which supports the individual in decision making by providing a moral context and goals consistent with the good of human life. Our tradition also expresses confidence in the decision-making process supported by the life-giving and compassionate Holy Spirit.

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The centerpiece of this slim volume written by Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, is the text delivered April 1, 2005 (the day before Pope John Paul II died), at Subiaco, Italy, on “The Crisis of Cultures.” Together with the “The Right to Life in Europe,” these two essays on the cultural crisis in Europe make up the first part of the book. The second part contains a substantial section on what it means to be a Christian believer. The connection between the parts is evident when Cardinal Ratzinger argues that the lives of true Christian believers will mitigate the cultural and moral crisis in Europe. When Christians are faithful to their calling, “traces of the truth and the force which is proper to it ... continue to live in forms often surprising right in the middle of a jungle full of poisonous plants.”

L’Europa di Benedetto nella Crisi delle Culture will be published in English in Spring 2006 by Ignatius Press, as Christianity and the Crisis of Cultures.

1 The text of the speech is available in English from ZENIT in four parts, at http://zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=74740, sid=74789, sid=74826, and sid=74864. The first part of the speech, translated by Adrian Walker, can also be found in Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, “Europe in the Crisis of Cultures,” Communio 32.2 (Summer 2005): 345–356.

2 All translations in this review are by the reviewer, Brian Benestad.