

***Renewing Christian Ethics: The Catholic Tradition*, by Michael E. Allsopp. Scranton, Pennsylvania: University of Scranton Press, 2005. 288 pages. Index.**

Michael Allsopp divides his book into three parts. The first two contain six chapters each, reviewing the various forms of ethical thinking practiced by Christian authors in the twentieth century. Allsopp briefly critiques their writings, carefully pointing out their strengths and weaknesses. The third part, in five chapters, is reserved for a treatment of his proposal for renewal. He calls his renewed Christian moral methodology a “Christian ethic of responsibilities.”

Allsopp is a professor of liberal arts and sciences at Mercy College of Health Sciences in Des Moines, and the book manifests his knowledge of a vast amount of literature in the field of Christian ethics and beyond. He asserts a more than casual interest in Gerard Manley Hopkins, on whom he has written widely. His review of the Christian ethics literature is helpful for one who wishes a panoramic view of that literature from Allsopp’s perspective.

Also helpful for the reader are the notes included at end of each chapter, which contain ample material extending the author’s observations in the text. These notes attest to Allsopp’s wide reading into, and critical assessment of, the jungle-like growth of Christian ethics literature in the twentieth century.

No attempt will be made here to assess whether the author has fairly evaluated the vast number of pages in which others have presented their takes on the Catholic tradition in ethics and morality. In my day there existed a loose distinction between *ethics* and *moral theology*, the former being the effort of “naked” human reason to deal with these issues and the latter the effort of reason aided by the light of faith.

Allsopp’s starting point, he asserts, is the call of Vatican II for a revitalization of moral theology within the Catholic Church. From here, he “builds upon the efforts of theologians such as Bernard Haring, Richard McCormick, Josef Fuchs, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Margaret Farley, Germain Grisez, and Enda McDonagh” (3). This list is a clue to the direction in which the book is heading . . . somewhat to the left. Also indicative of Allsopp’s theological orientation is his negatively flavored statement that “the Vatican threw its support behind local ‘conservative’ institutions (Pope John XXIII Center for Health Care Ethics, Braintree, MA; Pope John Paul II Center for Marriage and the Family, Washington, DC)” (24).*

In addition to “assessing the place of respect for papal authority, and regard for one’s own God-given ethical intuitions,” the author strives to “incorporate the insights of developmental psychologists into women’s moral development and decision making” (3). (But why only of women? Do only women make decisions?) Allsopp also includes in his armamentarium “widely accepted positions of Scripture scholars, sociologists, and cultural anthropologists” (3).

Allsopp seems to hold in horror the idea of being “outdated,” and the word (or its equivalent) appears a number of times in the text—in reference, for example, to “outdated

*I was the first full-time president of the first organization mentioned, which was originally located in St. Louis and known as The Pope John XXIII Medical-Moral Research and Education Center. After it moved to Braintree, near Boston, the name was changed, for simplification, to The Pope John Center for the Study of Ethics in Health Care. The name was changed again, more recently, to The National Catholic Bioethics Center, which is the publisher of this journal.

beliefs" (3), "worn-out notions" (42), and "views of morality and moral laws that have become dated" (67). His complaint about current official Catholic ethics is this:

As fair-minded assessments of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* show, the Catholic Church's "official" moral theology in 2002–2003 is still excessively rational and authoritarian; it seeks to persuade from fear rather than from friendship. In spite of some exceptions, there are still too many jeremiads in Catholic ethics, as seen when a person reads John Paul II's *Veritatis splendor* and pastoral statements in the areas of biomedical and sexual ethics published in recent years by U.S. bishops. (43)

Just what is Allsopp proposing by his "Christian ethic of responsibilities?" I hoped and expected to find a clear answer in the third, and final, part of his work. In the final chapter, he illustrates the application of his moral theory with specific examples, which include the decision of Nancy Cruzan's father to let her die in 1987; the decision of an inmate in a Soviet prison camp to commit adultery so that she could be reunited with her family; and the decision by Nano Nagle, founder of the Presentation Sisters, not to seek Vatican approval for the order. In the examples it seems to me, at least, that Allsopp is asking Christians to make what are traditionally known as *prudential judgments* about what decisions should be made and what actions should be taken or avoided. The term *responsibilities* suggests "justice" as the operative concept, which could be expanded to include love's demands.

To a traditional Catholic this is an unsettling work—not because the author wishes to renew a cherished and relatively secure element of Catholic teaching, but because it is not clear what the author is really proposing as a renewed Christian moral theory. Part of the problem is the author's expository style. Often he attempts to pack too much information into a single sentence, and his sentences are frequently burdened with two or more parenthetical modifiers. Instead of reading the text smoothly, the reader stumbles over the many qualifying phrases

or words. It is like driving an automobile, a light-weight model with tight springs, over a pot-holed road. The result is an uncomfortable ride and a knowledge of what streets to avoid in the future.

Interestingly, Allsopp asserts a certain need for ambiguity, describing times when a "religious ethicist . . . will sometimes . . . write with the deep-seated conviction that there are more important values at stake than permitting a reader to grasp his or her meaning 'at first glance'" (137). Allsopp illustrates his assertion with an example that also illustrates, unfortunately, the difficulties such a reader will encounter:

From time to time, seeing themselves as descendants of Origen and Abelard, the author of *The Cloud of Unknowing*, or the medieval dialogue *Mirouere des Simples Ames*, some ethicists will rank originality more important than tradition. Style, voice, vocabulary, context, and point-of-view—visionary insights and social convictions—will suffuse their presentations just as one finds when studying Picasso's drawings or Denise Levertov's poems. (137)

I found it almost impossible to discover just what constitutes Allsopp's "renewing" of Christian ethics. He inserts too many qualifications. As a consequence, I cannot tell you as clearly and simply as I would like just what he is proposing. I tried to form a clear statement from sentences that started with phrases like "This moral theory takes the position . . .," "This position admits that . . .," and "This model of ethics provides . . ." (140), but without success. Although not definitive, the following statement was helpful:

The most important influence on the development of many features of this theory is Sir William David Ross, Oxford scholar and public administrator, twentieth-century translator of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, creative critic of Kant's ethics and G. E. Moore's writings. . . . With Ross, this theory advances a duty-based theory of moral responsibilities in which individuals find themselves facing a slew of *prima facie* obligations, in addition to any duty to bring about the positive outcomes of their actions. (131)

Also helpful was Allsopp's outline of the principal theological orientations, tenets, and characteristics of his moral theory: it is *God-focused* (155), *Christ-centered* (157), *Spirit-filled* (159), *biblical* (160), *ecclesial* (161), *personal* (162), and *liberational* (163). But we are still left to wonder what the theory is itself. He tells the reader what shaped and influenced it. He outlines its features. And he assures us in various ways that it is current and in keeping with the latest findings in psychology, sociology, and anthropology.

Is the following sentence, perhaps, the clear statement of his renewed Christian moral theory? "This theory develops a mixed rule deontology in which agents make specific moral decisions on the basis of considered opinions about existent responsibilities toward themselves and others and what they here and now sensitively consider to be their weightiest duties" (192). If so, Allsopp is substituting a duty-based ethic for the principle-based one that characterizes current Catholic moral theory within the Church. It should be noted that the Church does not mandate a particular philosophy for its moral reasoning. It does require that the conclusions drawn are not in contradiction to revealed truths and its official teaching.

In Allsopp's conclusion, on the last page of the text, the reader will find this statement of the author's ethic:

Acceptance of God's will in daily life—and faithfully fulfilling (as best we can) what we see to be our *weightiest* duties—this is Christian morality, righteousness, and the road to paradise. This is the true meaning of "goodness" and "holiness" in Christian thought. And it is what the "voice of conscience" responding to God's Spirit, as well as God's presence in "dappled things," dictates and encourages, warns and guides. Our sense of duty—and our commitment to fulfilling our weightiest duties—shapes us and destines us for Absolute Goodness. (244)

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The Conjugal Act as a Personal Act: A Study of the Catholic Concept of the Conjugal Act in the Light of Christian Anthropology, by Donald P. Ascì. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2002. 364 pages. Bibliography.

One of the painful consequences of the sexual revolution was its impact on the institution of marriage. *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, addressed the ongoing influence of the tendencies toward promiscuity, divorce, adultery, and the contraceptive mentality which were taking a toll on married love in 1965. The muddled movements of those early days of the sexual revolution held marriage, compared to so-called free love, to be restrictive and confining. Wedlock was labeled a stoic ideal of repression of the human appetite from which the newly enlightened masses needed to be liberated.

Conversely, in the most recent wave of the sexual revolution, those who profess similar ideologies now anxiously desire, in the form of same-sex marriage, a facsimile of the very institution they were ready to disregard as stifling to human expression only four decades ago. Ironically, the institution which was then the bane of the sexual revolution is now chased by that revolution as its prize.

Those who support traditional marriage are often on the defensive or, worse still, silent about the dismantling of marriage. The debate about what actually constitutes marriage and family arises often in classrooms and offices, on playing fields and sidewalks, and most especially over the airways. But frayed tempers and brief sound bites barely allow anyone enough time to describe the unparalleled identity of the institution of marriage, much less speak in its defense. Meanwhile, the pundits glibly deconstruct the most recognized institution on the planet.

Donald Ascì's book, *The Conjugal Act as a Person Act: A Study of the Catholic Concept of the Conjugal Act in the Light of Christian Anthropology*, furnishes a foundation for a new confidence in its readers by enabling them to understand the heritage