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Scripture: The “Soul” of Moral Theology? — The Second Stage

Perspectives From History

A generation ago the use of scripture appeared to be on the verge of reconquering its rightful place in the sun within Roman Catholic theology. Vatican II’s “Decree on the Training of Priests” (Optatam totius), especially in its section on the revision of ecclesiastical studies, outlined how scripture was to function in the seminary curriculum. The conciliar document gave a specific mandate that all priesthood students “should receive a most careful training in holy scripture, which should be the soul, as it were, of all theology”. The decree then went on to affirm that these same students “should learn to seek the solution of human problems in the light of revelation, to apply its eternal truths to the changing conditions of human affairs, and to express them in language which people of the modern world will understand”.

In stating that scripture was to nourish all the branches of theology Optatam totius made both a clear assertion and a strong claim about the authority of scripture for theology. Moreover, lest moral theologians be tempted to seek some sort of special dispensation for themselves, their discipline came in for particular attention: “Special care should be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific presentation should draw more fully on the teaching of holy scripture and should throw light upon the exalted vocation of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to bring forth fruit in charity for the life of the world.” This concern of the Council Fathers for the renewal of moral theology had a certain resonance with an ongoing movement undertaken already beginning in the 1930s by a number of moralists who had been seeking to integrate scripture better in their discipline. Here one thinks pre-eminently of Bernard Häring’s monumental three-volume work, The Law of Christ, which first appeared in German in 1954, and which was subsequently translated into over a dozen languages.9

Following the close of the Second Vatican Council any number of great changes and notable advances have certainly been seen. Undeniably there is now a much greater stress on the centrality of scripture study in the whole seminary or divinity school curriculum than was the case in the pre-conciliar generations. The traditional “manual” approach also has been largely abandoned, and with it the tendency to have overly facile recourse to the Bible, largely, or merely, to confirm an argument or moral judgement which had already been established on other grounds, traditionally

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arrived at through a detailed exposition worked out in terms of some version of neo-scholastic theology. Of course, the manualists had always admitted that Revelation was an important source for moral theology, but the manner in which scripture was then applied or integrated into their moral textbooks would make most exegetes today cringe.

Even when attention was turned directly and specifically to a consideration of the Bible, the result was hardly entirely felicitous. For example, Msgrs Antonio Lanza and Pietro Palazzini, in their popular manual of moral theology, outlined a "proof" for their claims that the four gospels offer a "complete, unified, universal and original moral doctrine". According to these two moralists, such proof emerges clearly from the examination of: 1. the constant reference to the end of life which transcends the present and contingent (Mark 8:36-37), and to which everything should be subordinated (Matt 18:8-9); 2. the way to be followed in which the precepts indispensable for salvation (Matt 19:17) are clearly distinguished from the counsels proposed for the free consideration of anyone striving to reach a greater perfection (Matt 19:21); 3. The means, that is, grace (John 15:5), prayer (Mark 14:38), the Eucharist (John 6:35 et seq.) and the other sacraments.

The gospel does not treat then of a vague invitation to an ethical endeavour that is indefinite in its content; but gives precise norms which embrace all the relations of man towards God (Matt 22:37; Mark 16:16), towards his neighbour (Matt 4:38-47; 22:29), towards himself (Matt 22:39) and in confronting material things (Matt 6:19-21).^3

Most Roman Catholic moral theologians, as well as the majority of biblical exegetes today, would not readily grant Lanza and Palazzini either their original premise that the canonical gospels offer clearly a "complete, unified, universal and original moral doctrine", or their subsequent assertion that this same scriptural material "gives precise norms which embrace all the relations of man towards God, ... neighbour, ..." the self or any other part or aspect of creation. We now better realise the import of a whole range of hermeneutical and exegetical issues of which the manualists of the last several centuries were largely unaware. How some of these issues impinge on the use of the Bible in moral theology will be touched upon in the final section of this article, but here we should note that if scripture is to be the soul of all theology, this does not mean that all theological reflection must be explicitly corroborated by some appropriate biblical text (though this is precisely the approach espoused by biblical fundamentalists). Rather, the mandate from Ooplatam totius means that scripture should be the "animating" or life force for our theological efforts.

Of the contemporary successors to the manual tradition, i.e. those authors who have written a single work aimed at providing a comprehensive and unified treatment of fundamental moral theology for the seminary curriculum, nearly all now do include an entire chapter or two on biblical moral theology, and/or the relationship between Revelation and ethical principles. Besides these works on moral theology, a number of biblical exegetes have published several excellent studies which focus on the ethical material of scripture.\^4

In addition to these studies, the works of any number of Protestants have had a marked influence on contemporary Roman Catholic moral theologians as well. The relatively large number of such Protestant contributions should not be surprising given the strong sola scriptura tradition of using the scripture both as the starting point and ultimate authority, or "warrant", for their Christian ethics. Protestant authors whom one now finds regularly cited by Catholic moralists as well would include scholars such as Bruce Birch and Larry Rasmussen, Victor Paul Furnish, Stephen Charles Mott, Thomas Ogletree and Allen Verhey, to name just a few.\^5 However, even among Protestant ethicists themselves one can hear the occasional lament that insufficient attention has been given to the role of scripture in the discipline.\^6

Among contemporary Roman Catholic moral theologians, one who has consistently sought to develop the Vatican II mandate for a greater biblical nourishment of moral theology is Edouard Hamel, S.J., a former professor of moral theology at the Pontifical Gregorian University and one-time member of the International Theological Commission. In a series of articles written from 1966 to 1982 one of the principal themes Hamel stressed was the need for greater collaboration among moralists and exegetes if there were ever to be any realistic hope to fulfill the conciliar mandate.

In fact, the period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s did see a flurry of activity, at least in terms of conferences and congresses which investigated the ethical material in the Bible.\^7 This interdisciplinary cooperation found support in the papal magisterium as well. Pope John Paul II spoke on a number of occasions of the desirability for greater exchange and collaboration among moral theologians and scriptural exegetes.\^8

Although this brief sketch of recent history does indicate that Vatican II's call for greater heed for the use of scripture in the field of moral theology has not fallen on deaf ears, yet it must be said at the same time that there remains an obvious need for further ongoing efforts and reflection. Fr Hamel's articles sought principally to delineate some of the theological presuppositions for the use of biblical material in fundamental moral theology, while also underscoring the need for collaboration with biblical exegetes in order to establish a sound and careful reading of the scripture for its integration into moral theology.\^9
The work of theologians like Fr Hamel has given us a good basis in fundamental moral theology – in short, an excellent "First Stage" – on which Roman Catholic moral theologians can elaborate their efforts to "nourish" Christian ethics with scripture. However, it is my contention that what we need now is a "Second Stage" in which the focus is more on the issues of the authority of scripture for fundamental moral theology, as well as greater specific attention to the interrelations among scripture, exegesis and hermeneutics on one hand, and the ways in which scripture will inform moral theology as a whole, and concrete ethical cases in particular. Treatment of these considerations is what I term the "Second Stage".

The major purpose of this article, then, is to highlight some of these anterior considerations, as well as to propose a few directions for further reflection and work. Here, too, we do not start with a tabula rasa, and especially many of the aforementioned works by our fellow Christians in the various Protestant traditions can certainly be of great help.

However, without seeking to be either isolationist or sectarian, I would hold that as Roman Catholic moral theologians we need to ground this reflection more clearly within our own tradition. Obviously we need to get more "practical" too, and all such efforts can, and should, be done in accord with our own particular theological tradition. It could be argued that Protestants have already done more perhaps on this "practical" level on the methodological use of scripture in ethics than their Roman Catholic counterparts. On the other hand, Protestants will have their own operative presuppositions about the nature of Christian ethics, and about other important related topics as well, such as ecclesiology, the role and function of Church authority, dogmatic theology, and the sacramental and liturgical life of the Christian community. This is not in any way to deny the richness of the Protestant heritage in the past, and the ongoing value of that tradition for our common efforts to live as brothers and sisters of our one Lord. Rather, I simply propose that a concern for the methodology of the use of scripture in Roman Catholic moral theology seek to ground itself first in our tradition.

To this end, I propose to rehearse briefly what the Second Vatican Council did have to say which pertains to the way in which we perceive the practical relation of the Bible to our ethics. Then I will outline some fundamental considerations for any coherent use of scripture in moral theology which is in line with this relation. Nearly all contemporary Roman Catholic theologians no doubt do accept Vatican II's demand that scripture become the "soul" of moral theology; now might be the proper time for this "Second Stage" to address some of the related issues which remain before we can better encase this scriptural "soul" with some theological flesh and bones.

Paragraph 16 of Optatam totius certainly has become the locus classicus in regard to the use of scripture in theology as a whole, and more especially for the renewal of moral theology. However, though this particular citation has now virtually become a "proof text" of its own – so often is it quoted – usually only scant attention is given to the remainder of Vatican II's Decree on the Training of Priests. In reading the entire Decree one is struck by the great desire of the Council Fathers for a much greater integration of all the seminary subjects with each other, and in fact with all aspects of the entire life and training of the seminarians. Thus, scripture is not intended simply to be another subject "added on" to the curriculum, nor merely to have its lecture hours increased. Rather, scripture is proposed as the soul not only of theology, but of the whole life of the seminarians, in such a way that they "will draw pure Catholic teaching from divine revelation, will enter deeply into its meaning, make it the nourishment of their spiritual life, and learn to proclaim, explain, and defend it in their priestly ministry" (OT 16).

This theme of progressive integration runs throughout the document. It is also clear from a study of the Decree that the overall aim of the seminary course is not simply the mastery of a body of propositional knowledge, the "eternal verities" of old, but rather a real growth in human maturity (cf. 11), as well as a profound deepening of the living of Christ's "paschal mystery in such a way that they will know how to initiate into it people committed to their charge" (OT 8).

So, in sum, Optatam totius calls specifically for a greater co-ordination among all the academic branches and a greater integration with the students' comprehensive formation. Since scripture is to have its pride of place in both the academic and spiritual spheres of this total formation, so too the ways in which scripture is used in these different branches can furnish not only an important means for the nourishment of each discipline, but also a mode for the coordination and integration of the various aspects of the global seminary curriculum. Thus, what scripture has to say to moral theology may help better link that same moral theology to dogmatic and pastoral theology, liturgy and the whole liturgical life of the students, as well as to their own spiritual and human formation.

The question of concrete applications on just how scripture can inform moral formation and/or moral decisions I postpone for a further article on methodology, but at this juncture I would like simply to underscore some of the practical ramifications of the stress that Optatam totius puts on scripture. Scripture should furnish many of the key themes and images for theological elaboration and development, and therefore some traditional approaches may have to be "purified" by use of scripture. Thus,
for example, a manual of moral theology that would continue to ignore this integrative scriptural approach might well be deemed unacceptable according to the Council’s Decrees. It would seem obvious too that scripture should have pride of place over any one particular philosophical/theological system or methodology. Our “Second Stage” then should include a professional “examination of conscience” as well, to see if as Roman Catholic theologians we are responding adequately and accurately to these aspects of the Council’s call.

Dei verbum

Vatican II’s Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei verbum, was promulgated less than one month (on 18 November 1965) after Optatum totius, and obviously the close connection between these two documents goes beyond mere temporary proximity. As with the treatment of Optatum totius, I do not intend to offer an extended commentary of the Constitution, but merely wish to recall a few passages which have particular significance for the use of scripture in theology. In this regard, Dei verbum’s twin themes of the progressive understanding of the message of Revelation on the one hand, as well as the necessity of the basic exegetical task of trying to determine the meaning which the sacred writers of scripture had in mind are both worth noting. Thus, to a certain extent the moralist will also have to practise both hermeneutics and exegesis.

Chapter 1 of the Constitution concerns “Divine Revelation Itself” and accents the role of the Holy Spirit in the progressive human understanding of Revelation. The second chapter, “The Transmission of Divine Revelation”, underscores once again this progressive dimension of Revelation, including the ways in which Revelation is handed on. Chapter 3 then turns to the nature of the divine inspiration of scripture, and the absolute need for the interpretation of the written word.

Thus, following the lead of Dei verbum, we must affirm that God’s revelation contained in the scriptures only becomes fulfilled in a significant way by the very process of its being received and accepted in the faith of the believing individual and community. Reading the scriptures in the individual and community’s own context is what opens up the possibility of a new existence for them. Thus, a scripture-centred approach to moral theology is critical because only such an approach allows the revelatory biblical message to provide a critique not only of the contemporary culture, but also of previous efforts at the inculturation of the scriptures in the moral values of all other cultures, including those which have already been evangelised.

While the fourth and fifth chapters of Dei verbum treat the Old and New Testaments, attention is again focused on the role of scripture in the life of the Church in the short concluding sixth chapter, and here the metaphor of scripture as the soul of theology reappears once more. Thus, Dei verbum clearly leads to an understanding of Revelation that goes beyond a tradition-bound neo-scholastic emphasis on revealed truths which themselves transcend human reason; the whole process of the progressive appropriation of Revelation is presented as being both a dialogic and personal encounter between God and his people.

Likewise, a moral theology which is nourished by this understanding of scripture must pay greater attention to the aspects of the ongoing human and spiritual formation of both the individual and the Christian community. A moral theology thus construed could never content itself with simply defining the ends of the human person and the particular activity proper, or improper, lawful or not, for the realisation of these ends, but also must address, at least implicitly, the whole spectrum of the life of the individual Christian, and the community in which he or she is a member, as well as the world in which this community also finds itself.

Unitatis redintegratio

Before turning to a brief outline of some of the hermeneutical issues involved in the use of scripture in moral theology, there is still one more conciliar document which also supports this whole project. At first glance, Vatican II’s Decree on Ecumenism, Unitatis redintegratio, may seem an improbable place in which to find pertinent material on the proper use of scripture in Roman Catholic moral theology. However, this document does contain an important reference for ecumenical efforts on Christian ethics which would involve, at least implicitly, the use of scripture. The text to which I refer comes very near the Decree’s conclusion, in the subsection on “The Separated Churches and Ecclesial Communities in the West”. Here the Council Fathers trenchantly observe that often “if in moral matters there are many Christians who do not always understand the gospel in the same way as Catholics, and do not admit the same solutions for the more difficult problems of modern society, they nevertheless want to cling to Christ’s word as the source of Christian virtue and to obey the command of the apostle: ‘Whatever you do in word or in work, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him’ (Col 3:17). Hence, the ecumenical dialogue could start with the moral application of the gospel” (UR 23).

Following up on this conciliar lead I would simply emphasise that this sort of ecumenical dialogue and cooperation can be a happy by-product of the greater use of scripture in Christian ethics, whether Protestant or Roman Catholic. The dialogue on moral issues logically should proceed from our understanding of our common accounts of the Christian message, and therefore the place of the scriptures is obviously privileged in any such encounter.
Parenthetically, we would do well also to keep in mind that although historically Roman Catholicism has made great and good use of the natural law tradition in its moral theology, this very usage is often seen by Protestants as something distinctly Roman Catholic, and therefore, from the Protestant point of view, such an approach in fact falters somewhat in its claim to universalism. Now, as part of our “second stage” of the employment of scripture in ethics, I would suggest greater research, dialogue and collaboration with Protestant ethicists who, at least from a historical point of view, arguably had great experience in the use of the Bible in moral theology. At this juncture, we all should remember that the Bible is our common book, the only text which has a “sacred claim” on the entire Christian community, and that in our complicated pluralistic world we can no longer afford to be divided either religiously or methodologically on the principle of the Peace of Augsburg, cius regio, eius religio.

BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS AND AUTHORITY: THE “SACRED CLAIM”

The preceding remarks on these three conciliar documents raise one more set of key questions which must be addressed before we can proceed with a consideration of a methodology for the employment of scripture in Roman Catholic moral theology. In this context two principal features emerge: first, the authority of the Bible itself, and, second, the problematic of interpretation of the biblical text, or, in other words, hermeneutics. Much has already been written on these themes, and here all I mean to do is simply raise the issues and sketch out some of their important concerns and implications which they have for the use of scripture in moral theology. In a subsequent article on methodology I hope to fill in this outline with further discussion on how hermeneutics and authority would affect various approaches for a concrete application of scripture to some particular moral theme, problem or case.

A key point which was made explicit in Optatum totius is the fundamental authority the Bible itself has for theology. Of course, scripture had always been held, along with tradition and the magisterium, as one of the three basic fonts of moral theology. Yet, there has been a perduring tension over what practical bearing, if any, the Bible should have in the establishment of moral principles, as well as their application in a given problem or case. Over the last several years this debate, especially in Western Europe, has centered on the proprium or specificity of Christian ethics, and consideration of the proper role of scripture has been used by both sides to help define their relative positions. However, these polemics over the relation of biblical material to the possible specificity of Christian morality have had a certain deleterious effect on a proper consideration of the authority which scripture should have in any Christian ethics.

If the use of scripture in moral theology is to advance from the “Second Stage” which I have outlined here to a “Third Stage” in which the mandate of Optatum totius would be both better and more systematically and methodologically fulfilled, we must resolve more clearly the issue of what is really possible to say by the authority of scripture itself. The basic question of biblical authority concerns what I term a “sacred claim” which this particular text or book has for a particular community. In respecting this sacred claim it is not enough to call the Bible the “Holy Book” of Christians, to have it read liturgically, and to appeal to it occasionally either to clinch or bolster some moral point argued largely on other grounds.

Rather than serving as a court of first, last, or intermediate appeal, the authority of scripture means that as a whole it is constitutive of the community’s identity, and therefore is absolutely essential both to the establishment and preservation of that community’s self-understanding. This means that scripture itself has a sacred claim on that community’s identity and understanding. Scripture helps not just to “inform” the community’s views, but actually to form them into a community of a particular character. In that way scripture is “authoritative” in the sense of being decisive for both the individual and common life.

Finally, as David Kelsey has observed well, any expression such as, “Scripture is authoritative for theology” has a self-involving force. When a theologian says it, he does not so much offer a descriptive claim about a set of texts and one of its peculiar properties; rather, he commits himself to a certain kind of activity in the course of which these texts are going to be used in certain ways.

Many moral theologians frankly seem to falter especially on this last point, in that they concentrate overly much on the ethical “content” of this or that biblical text, rather than on the way the biblical material is to be used as a whole in moral theology. A related problem with the use, or non-use, of scripture in Roman Catholic moral theology is the fixation on the question of the “normativity” of some individual biblical passage or logion. This preoccupation rather distorts the whole hermeneutical process right from the outset, in that it tries to make of the scripture what it is not, nor was ever intended to be, i.e. a systematic exposition of moral norms.

My expression of “sacred claim” is meant simply to draw our attention more to the need to clarify precisely what we understand by scriptural authority, before we bring that authority to bear in our moral theology. Obviously such a view of biblical authority does not advocate a narrow sola scriptura approach to moral theology. Scripture does not give a systematic treatment of the whole of moral theology, and I have already mentioned the inadequacy of biblicist and/or fundamentalist interpretations of any scriptural text. Nor does scripture speak with one voice; there are varieties of discourse, such as exhortations, prohibitions,
parables, etc., and the variety of these forms must be recognised if we hope to use scripture profitably in our moral lives.

A careful consideration of the question of the authority which scripture has will also be of indispensable help in facing the next step, namely a valid interpretation and application of scripture, or, in other words, the whole process of hermeneutical reflection. Charles Wood captures well the interplay between authority and hermeneutics in this scriptural project:

The task of interpretation is to learn the sense of scripture, undertaking whatever development of one’s own capacities is requisite to that end, rather than to submit scripture to explanation in terms of one’s present knowledge and capacities (“making sense of it”) on the assumption that the latter are essentially adequate to whatever scripture may contain. To recognise the authority of scripture is, among other things, to submit one’s understanding to it: to be willing to be guided by it, and to allow one’s previous understandings to be challenged, extended, and transformed by it.16

The use of scripture in moral theology comes into sharper focus also as we reconsider the nature of moral theology itself in the post-Vatican II Church. We must recall that the preconciliar perception of the task of moral theology has broadened substantially in the last fifty years. Gone are days of the old manuals which aimed at the preparation of priests for the sacrament of penance, in which they were to act as judges in ascertaining the nature of the sins and relative guilt of the penitent. Instead, a contemporary description of fundamental moral theology might read like the following definition proposed by Richard Gula:

Moral theology, or Christian ethics, is concerned with God’s revelation of himself in Christ and through the Spirit as an invitation calling for our response. In short, moral theology is interested in the implications of Christian faith for the sorts of persons we ought to be (this is often called “the ethics of character” or “agency ethics”) and the sorts of actions we ought to perform (this is often called “the ethics of doing”). Both concerns – character (or agency) and action – need to be considered in any complete project of moral theology.17

Such a definition hardly implies that there is no longer any place for the discussion of moral norms or the interpretation and application of ethical principles in our lives. Nor does such a definition suggest a “separate” ethics for Christians. However, such a conception as Gula’s does require us to look at moral theology with a wider lens, and especially to see how vision and character can function in the Christian moral community. Viewed through this wider lens we see that scripture enjoys a definite pride of place, and can truly help “animate” the systematic work of all our theology, Christian ethics included.

CONCLUSION

As we have seen from the brief historical sketch in the first section, Vatican II’s call for greater heed for the use of scripture in the field of moral theology did receive a certain response, a “First Stage”, in which both ethicists and exegesis tried to highlight better the ethical dimension of scripture in their respective disciplines and to allow scripture as a whole to nourish theology more completely.

However, we now need to move beyond this First Stage to a Second and Third Stage. In this Second Stage I have suggested that we reconsider the thrust and import of the relevant documents from Vatican II, especially Optatum totius and Dei verbum, to ground better our reflections on the integration of scripture with theology as whole, and moral theology in particular. This is especially important if we are to realise the conciliar mandate of better coordination and integration of scripture in both theology and spiritual formation, as well as to deepen the whole Christian community’s progressive understanding of the message of Revelation. Hermeneutics and exegesis must become, to some extent at least, skills required of all moral theologians. Also as part of this Second Stage we need to look more carefully at how moral theology should be better interrelated and integrated with all the other branches of theology, especially dogmatic and pastoral theology, as well as the whole liturgical life of the Christian community.

Following the lead of Unitatis redintegrato, we in the Roman Catholic Christian community must also expand and deepen our efforts at ecumenical collaboration on contemporary matters of moral importance. In the greater part of the world today only such collaborative efforts will stand much of a chance of effective success in encountering the myriad problems posed by our societies. Gone forever are the days of religious kingdoms, and we must work more effectively to embody that for which we pray each year during the Christian Unity Octave. Such ecumenical collaboration should start with the simple recognition that the Bible is our common book, the scripture which has a sacred claim on both Catholics and Protestants, and which therefore can supersede other differences which might still divide us along sectarian lines.

Paying greater heed to scripture’s sacred claim on our moral theology also may mean that our understanding of that discipline may have to change somewhat. A more scripture-centred approach to moral theology must allow the revelatory biblical message to provide a critique not only of our contemporary culture and its ethical concerns but also of the whole way in which we do our moral theology. Thus, as I stated above, one aspect of our “Second Stage” would include a professional “examination of conscience”, to ascertain if, as Roman Catholic theologians, we are responding adequately and accurately to all these ramifications of the Council’s call for scripture to be the soul of theology. We need both to recognise and then “religiously submit” to the authority
which scripture has not only for our lives, but for our academic discipline as well. This means, to paraphrase Charles Wood cited above, we need to submit our understanding to scripture, be willing to be guided by that new understanding, and therefore to allow our previous understandings to be challenged, extended and transformed by the authoritative text which has a sacred claim on us by the fact that we call it our scripture.

Finally, it is obvious that such a “Second Stage” will not be a terminal stage. Thus, in our next stage we need to develop a better methodology which is in accord with a coherent understanding of the role of scripture in theology, and which at the same time is both practical and “practicable” in moving from a theoretical grasp of scripture’s proper role in moral theology to a concrete application to the particularities of Christian ethics.


2. However, there were not the only moral theologians in that epoch who sought to ground his discipline in a more integral understanding of scripture. Several other authors, such as those of Tillman, Mersin or Gillemann, attempted to find another overarching theme which would better help establish and organise the relationship between divine revelation in Jesus Christ and the Christian moral life. For example, Gérard Gillemann, S.J., used the concept of Christian charity in his The Primacy of Charity in Moral Theology, (Brussels: Éditions De Déesse, 1954). André Vachon, S.J. (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1959), from the French original, Brussels: Éditions Déesse, 1954. Other such organised “biblical” themes used by other authors included discipleship, and the Mystical Body. For a helpful overview of some of these chief currents of the period from the 1940s up to Vatican II see also Vincent MacNamara’s (New York: Paulist Press, 1984) “Ecclesial Novel-Scholarship to Renewal” in his book, The Christian Mission to Renewal (New York: Fordham University Press, 1985) 9-36.


6. For example, one well-known Lutheran theologian, Carl E. Braaten, complains of the “notorious indifference of Christian ethicists to the results of biblical scholarship.” Cited in his Eschatology and Ethics: Essays on the Theology and Ethics of the Kingdom of God (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1974) 106.


8. For both the historical context and brief summary of each of these papal allocutions see Édouard Hamel’s “Écriture et théologie morale. Un bilan (1940-1980),” Studia Moralia 20 (1982) 177-93, and especially the section “Jalons d’histoire”, 178-83.


10. For a concrete example of the importance of such a shift in approach, consider Rudolf Schnackenburg’s complaint that one important biblical theme, eschatology, seems to have been either misunderstood or largely overlooked by many moral theologians: “We can only regret the fact that this motive of eschatological sharing in God’s perfect reign has faded from view. It is ‘getting to heaven’, for the result is the satisfaction of the great cosmic vision, in favour of the personal bliss of every individual after death, so that the Christian is led to think more of the salvation of his own soul than of the consummation of the history of salvation, more of the blessedness of the glorification of God — no more than a shift in emphasis, to be sure, but one not unimportant in determining the patterns of our moral discourse.” (The Moral Teaching of the New Testament, 148).

11. In this context see Pope Paul VI’s Evangelii nuntiandi, especially paragraphs 17-24.


13. In addressing both this “public” and this task, our Roman Catholic moral theology would do well not to forget or minimise the abiding presence and role of the Holy Spirit in the Christian community. It is Jesus’ promise of the Paraclete which aids our progressive comprehension and growth in the mystery of Revelation (DV par. 5). This Spirit of Jesus is not merely an abiding presence in the Christian community, but we should expect to have our “memories” jolted and inspired by this same Spirit (cf. Jn 14:26).

14. One group of theologians, usually called the Moral Autonomy School (e.g., Josef Fuchs, Albrecht Rauscher, Bruno Schüller, etc.) holds that scripture itself adds nothing distinctive to Christian ethics. Their position is that in terms of the content of morality, Christians have no special norms nor special revelation. Therefore, the Christian demands of the moral life are identical with those for non-Christians. However, there is another group of theologians, often identified as the Glaubensethik or Faith-Ethics School (e.g. Bernard Haring, Joachim Ratzinger, Heinz Schirmann, etc.) which holds that the Bible is an important source of moral teaching that is absolutely necessary to aid human reason. This necessity is due to the fact that human reason may be clouded by sin, or unconsciously influenced by other pressures and factors in contemporary secular society. For an excellent discussion of the Moral Autonomy/Glaubensethik debate see Vincent MacNamara’s Faith and Ethics, cited above, 111–112.

