SELECTED DEFINITIONS OF MORAL THEOLOGY AND/OR CHRISTIAN ETHICS

Pre-Vatican II (before 1962):

1 "The part of theology which deals with human actions and studies the rules of human conduct in their relationship to the principles of revelation is called moral theology. Christian ethics does not eliminate, but embraces and perfects, natural ethics. For this reason, moral theologians include in their treatises the norms of the natural law. The field of moral theology embraces natural and supernatural ethics. It is the function of moral theology to dictate norms for all human activities in order that they may conform to the principles of reason and Christian revelation." Msgr. Giuseppe Graneris, "Moral Theology," in Dictionary of Moral Theology, ed. Roberti and Palazzini, (London: Burns & Oates, 1962): 1219.

Post-Vatican II (after 1965):

2 "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." Richard M. Gula, S.S., What Are They Saying About Moral Norms?, (New York: Paulist Press, 1982): 9.

3 "Since we begin in faith, Christian ethics is and ought to be a theological discipline, an attempt to reflect upon the questions to which we are driven by our desire to live faithfully. Christian ethics is therefore singular--developed from within the faith, not from any neutral or universally shared starting point. Nonetheless, that starting point teaches us to think of all human beings in certain ways, to seek and perhaps find common ground with others on some questions, and to value our own naturally and historically given insight." Gilbert C. Meilaender, Faith and Faithfulness: Basic Themes in Christian Ethics, (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1991): x.

4 "Moral theology, as I understand it, is not concerned first with decision-making or with discrete acts. Its basic task and purpose is to gain the right vision, to assess the main perspectives, and to present those truths and values which should bear upon decisions to be made before God." Bernard Häring, C.Ss.R., Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity, Volume I: General Moral Theology, (Middlegreen, Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1978): 6.

5 "...ethics is first a way of seeing before it is a matter of doing. The ethical task is not to tell you what is right or wrong but rather to train you to see." Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony: a Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989): 95.
He [H. Richard Niebuhr] conceived of Christian ethics to be the effort of the Christian community to criticize its moral action by means of reflection. This critical inquiry is not confined to the process of moral self-judgment in the community, to the process of evaluation of its life in the light of certain expectations and norms. Rather it is a critical inquiry in a more generous philosophical sense, an inquiry into the nature of its moral life, the principles of life (principles in terms of those things that are most universally true and proper about its being). Thus a major part of ethics is a phenomenological analysis of man's moral existence. ... Ethics is not the narrative account of the moral action of members of the Christian community. It has the task of disclosing the basic pattern, the morphology of the life and action of the Christian community in the moral sphere--the way of thinking and acting that is true to its character as a community of me before God." James M. Gustafson, "Introduction" to H. Richard Niebuhr's The Responsible Self: An Essay in Christian Moral Philosophy, (New York: Harper & Row, 1963): 8.

"So we might say that moral theology is that part of theology which, in the light of revelation and faith lived in the church community, aims to point the way to the full humanization of persons and society, in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and his Kingdom." Antônio Moser and Bernardino Leers, Moral Theology: Dead Ends and Ways Forward, (Wellwood: Burns & Oates; and Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1990): 10.


*Your "working definition" of moral theology or Christian ethics:*