

## *After Virtue*, Thirty Years After: Laudatio for Alasdair MacIntyre

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BENEVOLENT READER, allow me to start with a personal reminiscence. Shortly after the publication in 1991 of the first edition of *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics*,<sup>1</sup> I was sitting in my office, and the phone rang. On the line was Professor MacIntyre. He had received the book, and he wanted to express an appreciation for it. His formal review appeared the next year in *The Thomist*.<sup>2</sup> Professor MacIntyre's telephone call did more than encourage me. At that moment, the author of *After Virtue* generated a confidence within me that still sustains my work in moral theology. So I would like to take this occasion to express gratitude to Professor MacIntyre. The generative encouragement that he gives to me and other Catholic moral theologians merits a more eloquent recognition than these few remarks indicate.<sup>3</sup>

What follows provides, in very broad terms, some future directions that, in my view, Professor MacIntyre's work offers to moral theologians. While many richly suggestive intuitions emerge from the MacIntyrian corpus, there are three that moral theologians should heed, especially during a period when many people fail properly to evaluate moral conduct. One also may take these directions as encouragements, really; encouragements that, as I see it, Professor MacIntyre's books and essays offer to moral theologians who wish to remain faithful to Catholic teaching, especially as it finds expression in the writings of Saint Thomas Aquinas and his commentators.

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<sup>1</sup> Romanus Cessario, O.P., *The Moral Virtues and Theological Ethics* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> *The Thomist* 56 (1992): 339–44.

<sup>3</sup> These remarks were delivered during a three-member panel discussion sponsored by the Ethics and Catholic Theology Interest Group and entitled “*After Virtue*, Thirty Years After: The Importance of Alasdair MacIntyre for Moral Theology,” at the Society of Christian Ethics Annual Meeting in Washington, DC, on 7 January 2012.

First, I would point to the place that sound philosophy holds in moral theology. The work of Alasdair MacIntyre reminds moral theologians that moral philosophy enjoys its own integrity, even though the moral theologian elevates the arguments of moral philosophy to illuminate a world that only the eyes of faith can behold. This reminder comes with a certain urgency. Not a few moral theologians have understood the Second Vatican Council's instruction to moral theologians as one that authorized a practical rupture with all that had gone before, especially the realist metaphysics that stands at the heart of Thomism.<sup>4</sup>

For example, consider the way that certain moral theologians have tried to construct, almost exclusively, their moral theologies based on the findings of scriptural studies. It is true, *Optatam totius*, the conciliar "Decree on Priestly Training," called for a biblical renewal of moral theology.<sup>5</sup> Number 16 of this Vatican II Decree specifically instructs: "Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world."<sup>6</sup> The authors of this mid-twentieth-century document—it is interesting to recall within the context of continuity and tradition—borrowed from the 18 November 1893 encyclical of Pope Leo XIII, *Providentissimus Deus*, which had stipulated that the study of sacred Scripture "ought to be the soul of all theology," including moral theology.<sup>7</sup> Pope Leo XIII is the Roman pontiff who also bears the responsibility for launching the renewal of Thomism that began fourteen years before the encyclical was issued.

Under the impetus of the conciliar directive, efforts at doing biblical moral theology have continued over the past four decades or so. The results are difficult to assess. Recently, however, the Pontifical Biblical Commission issued a document entitled "The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct."<sup>8</sup> The preface alerts us to what should come as no surprise to a Thomist, namely, that this Commission document "stresses the

<sup>4</sup> I refer especially to those positions that were corrected by the 1993 Encyclical Letter of Pope John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*.

<sup>5</sup> Decree on Priestly Training, *Optatam Totius*, proclaimed by His Holiness Pope Paul VI on 28 October 1965.

<sup>6</sup> "Specialis cura impendatur Theologiae morali perficiendae, cuius scientifica expositio, doctrina S. Scripturae magis nutrita, celsitudinem vocationis fidelium in Christo illustret eorumque obligationem in caritate pro mundi vita fructum ferendi" (*Optatam Totius* 16).

<sup>7</sup> *Optatam Totius* 16. The reference to Leo XIII is given from AAS 26 (1893–94): 283.

<sup>8</sup> Pontifical Biblical Commission, *The Bible and Morality: Biblical Roots of Christian Conduct* (Vatican City State: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008).

fact that direct solutions to the numerous outstanding problems cannot be found in Sacred Scripture.”<sup>9</sup> Where can one turn? Alasdair MacIntyre, I aver, would point to the words of Pope John Paul II in the 1995 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*: “Moral theology requires a sound philosophical vision of human nature and society, as well as of the general principles of ethical decision-making.”<sup>10</sup> Professor MacIntyre reminds moral theologians that moral philosophy rightly developed remains indispensable to the “scientific exposition” of moral theology. He does not advocate compromising the integrity of “constrained disagreement” carried on after the fashion of Saint Thomas Aquinas to meet confessional goals.<sup>11</sup>

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The second encouragement that the writings of Professor MacIntyre provide for a new generation of moral theologians concerns Pope John Paul II’s “sound vision of human nature.” One area where the purveyors of the hermeneutics of discontinuity have imposed themselves with a special virulence is post-Vatican II discussions of the relationship between human nature and divine grace. Many moral theorists today regard human nature as oddly peripheral to moral inquiry. Not all of them, however. In his endorsement for Professor Steven A. Long’s *Natura Pura*, Professor MacIntyre writes: “No one is more insightfully aware of the issues that arise where philosophy and theology interact than Steven Long. No set of such issues is more important than those concerning the natural end of human beings and our knowledge of that end.”<sup>12</sup> Steven A. Long, of course, criticizes those theologians who seem to regard human nature as a “vacuole for grace.”<sup>13</sup> In a short *First Things* review, an otherwise benevolent reviewer of Long’s book mistook “vacuole” for “vehicle.”<sup>14</sup> This substitution suggests how little is understood about a theme that dominates Catholic thought: *gratia perficit naturam*.<sup>15</sup>

I think it fair to observe that many moral theologians must recover a sound philosophical vision of human nature. This recovery must lead also

<sup>9</sup> *The Bible and Morality*, 8.

<sup>10</sup> Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on the Relationship Between Faith and Reason, no. 68.

<sup>11</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry. Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 1990), 233.

<sup>12</sup> Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), back jacket cover.

<sup>13</sup> Long, *Natura*, chap. 2.

<sup>14</sup> Review of Steven A. Long, *Natura Pura: On the Recovery of Nature in the Doctrine of Grace* in *First Things* (January 2012), 62.

<sup>15</sup> For example, see *Summa theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2: “Since therefore grace does not destroy nature but perfects it, natural reason should minister to faith as the natural bent of the will ministers to charity.”

to an appreciation among moral theologians of the “stuff,” if you will, of human nature and of the teleological ordering of that nature. In a word, they need to determine what enables the person to love. While there are several ways to approach this discovery or rediscovery of human nature, some fairly basic indications of what an adequate anthropology looks like appear in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Without presuming to provide an exhaustive account of the philosophy, including the anthropology, contained in the *Catechism*, let me suggest some very basic tenets about the structure of the human being that this authoritative expression of Catholic teaching contains. For instance, moral theologians can learn about the substantial unity of the human person. “The unity of soul and body,” affirms the *Catechism*, citing the Council of Vienne (1312) [DS 902], “is so profound that one has to consider the soul to be the ‘form’ of the body.”<sup>16</sup> Or again, “the passions are natural components of the human psyche.”<sup>17</sup> Again, “Conscience is a judgment of reason.”<sup>18</sup> Still again, “The virtuous person tends toward the good with all his sensory and spiritual powers.”<sup>19</sup> In other words, basic Catholic doctrine indicates the essential elements of what one may call a Christian anthropology. A sound vision of human nature must include both a soul, which enjoys spiritual or rational powers and sensory powers, and a body. Furthermore, a sound vision of human nature must explain how the powers of the soul, including the sensory powers, work together so that an individual can pursue conscientiously the truth about the good of the human person and embrace it. Professor MacIntyre at least indirectly encourages moral theologians to discover the complete implications of a grace-uplifted human nature, even though he would insist, I should think, that the moral theologian can make this discovery without draining the natural of its own distinctive finality and intelligibility.

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The third encouragement that Professor MacIntyre’s work gives to moral theologians involves the place that virtue holds in contemporary moral theology. Last year marked the thirtieth anniversary of Professor MacIntyre’s *After Virtue*.<sup>20</sup> Moral theologians need to learn how to treat all the virtues of the Christian life. All seven of them. They also must learn how

<sup>16</sup> CCC, 365.

<sup>17</sup> CCC, 1764.

<sup>18</sup> CCC, 1796

<sup>19</sup> CCC, 1803.

<sup>20</sup> Alasdair C. MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). A second edition was published in 1984, and a third in 2007.

to discuss their parts, integral, subjective, and potential. In the words that he kindly included in *Ressourcement Thomism*, Professor MacIntyre comments on the way that one moral theologian has presented the relationship of the acquired and the infused virtues.<sup>21</sup> Students of the virtues recognize that there exists a history of diverse views about how acquired and infused virtues work together to shape the character of a person who merits eternal life.

It is my conviction that the salvation of souls and the well-being of the human community require that Catholic moral theologians possess an understanding of the acquired and infused virtues that enables those drawn to a life of holiness to sustain the virtuous life in the face of whatever difficulties our morally adrift culture throws up against them. This Catholic understanding must allow for the normal development of the acquired moral virtues so that moral theologians may account for why, for example, a person can still walk down a street without fearing that the first stranger—or friend—he meets may arbitrarily decide to kill him. A proper understanding of the acquired virtues also explains why not even moral theologians ask for the Baptismal certificates or inquire about the Church-going practices, still less the spiritual lives, of the pilots who fly the planes that they board. Without the view of human virtues that MacIntyre has restored to a broad-ranging discussion and a widespread acceptance, it would be difficult to explain why some forms of moral order still appear in the world. Why, that is, we expect to find in civilized communities honest police and fair judges, everyday people who practice continence and perseverance, and people or institutions, such as societies for ethical culture, to whom one may turn for moral counsel. The human virtues are not fictions of the theologian's imagination. They explain everyday life. For example, we come to expect that the local butcher will remain just and friendly and that the neighborhood bartender will exhibit moderation and, at times, liberality. Justice, friendliness, moderation, and liberality express qualities of a person's character. These broad generalizations of course raise questions that a new generation of moral theologians will need to ponder rightly.

Professor MacIntyre has shown us why men and women living together in whatever form of human community require the acquired virtues. He is right, of course. Thirty years after the publication of *After Virtue* one does not find much evidence to support the view that purely

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<sup>21</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, 'There Is Only One Sadness . . . Not to Be Saints.' An Expression of Gratitude to Father Romanus Cessario, O.P.," in *Ressourcement Thomism: Sound Doctrine, the Sacraments, & the Moral Life*, ed. R. Hütter and M. Levering (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2010), 365–71.

deontological rules suffice to curb the burgeoning spread, for example, of internet pornography. Some contemporary authors, however, seem to have forgotten important features of the human or acquired virtues. Why are the acquired virtues important? For one reason, only these virtues create the psychological structures in the human person that are necessary for the Christian virtues to operate promptly, joyfully, and easily. Other benefits for virtuous living come with the infused or Christian virtues, although only the theologian can discuss with clarity these distinct gifts of grace.

In short, through the mystery of the Incarnation, God introduces into the world another order and power of moral action. The Catholic tradition refers to these powers as the infused virtues. They are real *habitus* of action, whose psychology depends not on the rhythms of moral exercise and practice but on the strength of one's adherence to the Savior of the world. The sooner moral theologians learn how to explain the manner in which the two sets—acquired and infused—of operative powers work together and, at times, apart, the sooner the next generation will discover the resources to resist the disintegration of human flourishing that institutionalizes itself in our societal and political structures with a rapidity that should give everybody moment for long pause.

Professor MacIntyre does not take up the discussion of grace-given *habitus*. He does, however, remind us of the one real tragedy for the creature created in the image of God: “There is only one sadness . . . Not to be saints.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> MacIntyre, “There Is,” in *Ressourcement*, 370–71.