

Catechesis and Moral Theology: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Christian Experience*

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Introduction

WHILE DIFFERENT IN MANY RESPECTS, the fields of moral theology and catechetics do have significant shared concerns because both of these theological disciplines have to do with the intersection of truth and life. Moral theology has to do with the way in which we live in light of what we profess about God. Catechesis is the handing on of the truth of the Christian faith in a way that produces life in those who receive it. At the heart of this intersection between truth and life is “the mystery of Christ.”¹

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¹ The phrase is used to describe the catechetical task by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (1979): “The primary and essential object of catechesis is, to use an expression dear to St. Paul, and also to contemporary theology, ‘the mystery of Christ’” (§5). Another way to understand this is to see the four pillars of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as an interconnected whole with the Person of Christ as its dynamic center. One can make a further distinction between the ministry of catechesis and the study of effective means to engage in it or the discipline of catechetics.

But the effort to understand this intersection of truth and life raises for us the question of experience, which seems to be a burning issue—perhaps *the* burning issue—in both of these areas of theology. What is the nature of Christian experience or, perhaps more broadly, human experience and what is its role in passing on the faith or in reflecting on its moral requirements? How do we discern the difference between distorted and authentic accounts of experience in these endeavors? The recent history of both moral theology and catechesis and the controversies within them raise such questions and indicate something of their gravity and pressing nature. In what follows I will argue that a recovery of the centrality of the encounter with Christ for Christian moral teaching and catechesis is the key to understanding the place of authentic Christian experience within these disciplines.

My argument will proceed in a number of steps. First, I will offer a rather compressed overview of the history of Catholic moral theology and catechesis in the modern period, focusing on some important parallels between them. Next, I will examine the way in which both of these theological disciplines have come to focus on experience as a central category and some of the questions and problems that this has produced within them. I will then argue for the need to refocus these theological endeavors on the encounter of the human person with Christ, utilizing documents such as *Gaudium et Spes* (GS), *Catechesi Tradendae*, and *Veritatis Splendor*. The final section will consider something of the contribution of this Christological focus, drawing on the thought of St. Augustine as a particularly fruitful resource for understanding the role of experience within the theological endeavor.

A Parallel History The Post-Reformation Context

Even a cursory examination of the history of what came to be called Catholic moral theology and catechesis in the modern period reveals some striking parallels—in no small part because of the common historical and intellectual context in which these disciplines functioned. The Council of Trent, confronting the challenge of the multiple Reformations dividing the Western Church, sought to respond through the adoption of a kind of battle posture and a new focus on uniformity of

practice, teaching, and action.² For the first time in its history the Catholic Church established seminaries so that clergy would receive a minimum of theological and pastoral education. It was Trent's recommendation that in seminary courses, moral topics be treated separately from dogmatic ones (in order to better prepare future confessors) that gave impetus to the birth of moral theology as a separate discipline.³

The impact of the Council on the Church was a lasting one. Just three years after the close of the council (1566), a universal catechism was produced that came to be known as "the Catechism of the Council of Trent."⁴ This work would serve as the basis for catechetical instruction and as the model for local catechisms for centuries. In the emerging science of moral theology, the aftermath of Trent saw the birth of a new genre—the manuals of moral theology. Many of these works purported to be modeled on the *secunda pars* of St. Thomas Aquinas's *Summa theologiae* (ST)—yet in many cases they bore the imprint of the fourteenth-century revival of nominalist thought, which was foreign to the thought world of St. Thomas and produced a different conception of the moral life.⁵ According to Servais Pinckaers, O.P., in his incisive account of the history of Catholic moral teaching, many of the manualists "read Thomas through nominalist lenses" leading them to construct a "morality of obligation" focused on the dialectic of law and freedom rather than a morality of happiness realized through virtue. This influence gave

² On the multiplicity of "Reformations" in the sixteenth century, see David Bentley Hart, *The Story of Christianity* (London: Quercus Press, 2012), 190–93. On the "bat-tle posture" adopted by the Catholic Church at Trent, see Timothy O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1990), 18–19.

³ On the "separateness" of moral theology after Trent, see O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 18; and John Mahoney, S.J., *The Making of Moral Theology: A Study of the Roman Catholic Tradition* (New York: Oxford, 1987), 24. Mahoney emphasizes the impact of auricular confession on the development of Catholic moral teaching from the early Church to the modern period (cf. 1–36). See also John Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future: An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1990), 33–34.

⁴ See Mahoney, *Making of Moral Theology*, 24.

⁵ For an overview of the emergence of the manuals and their history see Gallagher, *Time Past*, 29–47. For a summary of their content, see 48–97. On the impact of nominalism on the manuals and an incisive analysis of the differences between their moral teaching and that of St. Thomas, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble, O.P. (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 254–79, 327–99.

them a voluntarist cast that, when brought into contact with changing economic systems and the issues generated by the contact of Europe with the New World, helped spawn the competing systems of casuistry of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶

Yet this insular world of the post-Tridentine Catholic Church was not wholly immune from the encroachments of the modern world. The rationalism of the Enlightenment, the impact of scientific thinking and empiricist methodology, and the legacy of positivist thought, all left an imprint on the neo-scholastic Catholic thought of the modern period.⁷ Revelation was often conceived as a deposit of truths, understood and elaborated propositionally by the authority of the Church to be consigned to memory through catechetical memorization. Catholic moral teaching bore the same tendencies toward objectivism and authoritarianism with the added focus on law and its application through a case-based casuistry.⁸

Impulses toward Renewal

In the twentieth century it became increasingly clear to many Catholic theologians that this insular thought world was in need of significant renewal. The tonic offered by these forms of catechetical instruction or moral teaching had become insipid and stale. Alongside the impulses

⁶ For a summary of this casuistry and its basic principles, see Gallagher, *Time Past*, 98–122. For a more contextual and sympathetic overview of modern casuistry, see the essays collected by James F. Keenan, S.J., and Thomas Shannon, *The Context of Casuistry* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1995). For a critique of the “morality of obligation” that the manuals embody and the competing moral systems that they spawned (even a gentle critique of the equiprobabilism of St. Alphonsus Liguori), see Pinckaers, *Sources of Christian Ethics*, 266–77. Cf. Romanus Cessario, O.P., *An Introduction to Moral Theology*, Catholic Moral Thought Series (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2001), 229–42.

⁷ See, for example, the fine study of Gerald McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury Press, 1977); and Joseph Ratzinger, “The Renewal of Moral Theology: Perspectives of Vatican II and *Veritatis splendor*,” *Communio* 32 (2005): 357–68 (see esp. 358).

⁸ David Bohr mentions objectivism, legalism, rationalism, and authoritarianism as tendencies of what he describes as the “classical worldview.” See his *Catholic Moral Tradition: In Christ a New Creation*, rev. ed. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1999), 81–87. I would argue that these are apt descriptions of neo-scholastic moral theology—the effort to apply it to scholastic theologians such as St. Thomas can be effectively challenged (and has been by scholars such as Pinckaers, on whom Bohr relies).

toward renewal seen in biblical studies and liturgical theology, the field of catechetics also saw the stirrings of such renewal in the early twentieth century.⁹ The approach to catechesis that focused on a rote memorization of doctrine (enshrined in the United States in the Baltimore Catechism) came to be seen by many as inadequate. Hence Johannes Hofinger, one of the key figures of the catechetical renewal in the mid to late twentieth century, would remark retrospectively:

Let us recall the lengthy, difficult and pictureless catechisms of those days, splendid models no doubt of precise formulation of the Church's doctrine, but equally splendid models of a completely unpsychological presentation of that doctrine. To make matters worse, children were generally required to learn these unchildlike catechisms by heart, word for word. We do not need to say that the result in many cases was mere mechanical memorizing of texts, the meaning of which was often grasped in part or perhaps not at all; and that these memorized texts offered the well-meaning, but helpless, child next to no nourishment for his religious life.¹⁰

This perceived inadequacy would give birth to a renewal movement that proceeded in three phases. In the words of Bernard Marthaler,

Up to the present the modern catechetical movement has evolved though three more or less distinct stages. The first began with a quest to find a more effective method than the one then in use and then gradually evolved into a second phase, which was more concerned

⁹ I am indebted in this brief overview of the history of the catechetical movement to the outstanding analysis provided by Brian Pedraza, "Reform and Renewal in Catechesis: The Council, the Catechism, and the New Evangelization," *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 19, no. 1 (2012): 141–71.

¹⁰ Johannes Hofinger and Francis J. Buckley, *The Good News and Its Proclamation: Post Vatican II Edition of the Art of Teaching Christian Doctrine* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968), 3–4. Other authors were more caustic, referring to the approach as a "catechetical straight-jacket." The phrase is that of Gerard Sloyan, *Speaking of Religious Education* (New York: Herder, 1968), 16. Still others would describe it as embodying a "minimalistic and legalistic view of the Catholic faith" that was "authoritarian and fear-centered." See Mary Perkins Ryan, "The Identity Crisis of Religious Education," *Living Light* 5, no. 4 (1968–69): 6–18; here 8.

with content than method. And most recently, the third phase sees catechetics broadening its ken to include a variety of educational ministries and instructional strategies.¹¹

The first phase, centered in Germany, has come to be called the Munich Method. Drawing on the insights of educational psychology, this approach used stories (frequently drawn from Scripture), the highlighting of particular doctrinal points contained in such stories, and then considered their application to the life of the hearer.¹² The second phase, drawing more directly on the renewal underway in biblical, liturgical, and patristic studies, focused on the proclamation of Jesus Christ as the heart of catechesis.¹³ This kerygmatic approach saw the encounter with the Person of Christ mediated through scripture and the liturgy as the unifying center of catechesis too often fragmented between doctrinal assent and Christian living. The high watermark of this phase was reached in the first of the catechetical study weeks at Eichstätt in 1960.¹⁴

But this new focus on content over method also had its critics. It seemed to some that the old neo-scholastic doctrinal catechesis had been replaced by an equally narrow emphasis on Scripture.¹⁵ This mere-

¹¹ Berard Marthaler, "The Modern Catechetical Movement in Roman Catholicism: Issues and Personalities," in *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, vol. 1, ed. Michael Warren (Winona, MN: St. Mary's Press, 1983), 276.

¹² The approach was based on the psychological research of Johann Friedrich Herbart. See *ibid.*, 276. Something like this approach can be seen in the popular American Christian book and video series aimed at children known as "Veggie Tales."

¹³ One of the key figures in this phase of the movement, Josef Andreas Jungmann, was best known as a scholar of liturgy. His work *Die Frohbotschaft und unsere Glaubensverkündigung* (Regensburg: Freidrich Puster, 1936), edited and published in English as *The Good News Yesterday and Today*, trans. William A. Huesman (New York: Sadlier, 1962), and the reaction to it helped to launch this second phase. In this, his work can be understood as part of the emphasis on *ressourcement* that preceded the Second Vatican Council. See Michael Warren, "Jungmann and the Kerygmatic Theology Controversy," in *Sourcebook for Modern Catechetics*, 194; and Mary C. Boys, *Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education: A Study of the Kerygmatic Era* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1980).

¹⁴ On the significance of this meeting, see Marthaler, "Modern Catechetical Movement," 280. The papers collected and published by Jungmann's student Johannes Hofinger bear witness to the broad acceptance of the kerygmatic approach. See *Teaching All Nations: A Symposium on Modern Catechetics*, ed. Johannes Hofinger, trans. Clifford Howell (New York: Herder, 1961).

¹⁵ On this see Alfonso Nebrada, *Kerygma in Crisis* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1965).

ly served to replace “old scholasticism with the new biblicism.”¹⁶ This sense, coinciding with the teaching of Second Vatican Council, led at subsequent study weeks (held at Bangkok [1962], Manila [1967], and Medellín [1968]) to the decisive shift to the third phase—a focus on human experience as the heart and locus of catechesis. Drawing on the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget, this approach saw experience as the key to learning and hence turned to the experience of the subjects of catechesis with its individual and cultural particularity.¹⁷ Catechesis was now aimed at helping those who took part in it draw out the presence of God from within their own experience and concrete social situation. This emphasis on personal experience and inculturation would at Medellín be joined to a focus on liberating praxis from a then-emerging theology of liberation.¹⁸ For many, this anthropological and experiential turn was simply following the trajectory of Vatican II’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

By comparison, moral theology was something of a late bloomer in terms of the theological renewal of the twentieth century, but here too the impact of new biblical scholarship and the subsequent interpretation of the council played important roles. The insights of biblical scholarship began to be utilized by influential moral theologians such as the Redemptorist Bernard Häring in Germany.¹⁹ When Häring and Jesuit

¹⁶ The phrase is that of José M. Calle, “Catechesis for the Seventies Part II,” *Teaching All Nations* 7 (1970): 94. On this, see also Kenneth Barker, who argues that the kerygmatic worldview remained essentially “supernaturalist.” See his *Religious Education, Catechesis, and Freedom* (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1981), 62.

¹⁷ See Marthaler, “Modern Catechetical Movement,” 279; and Boys, *Biblical Interpretation in Religious Education*, 213–14.

¹⁸ On the importance of inculturation as emphasized at the Bangkok study week, see Nebrada, “East Asian Study Week,” 45; and [author unnamed] “The Implications of Vatican II for the Mission in Asia,” in *Teaching All Nations* 4 (1967): 320–21. On Medellín’s emphasis on liberating praxis, see Francis Houtart, “Reflections in the New Thinking in Latin America,” in *The Medellín Papers*, ed. Johannes Sheridan and Terrance Hofinger (Quezon City: East Asian Pastoral Institute, 1969), 72–73; and Marthaler, *Catechetics in Context: Notes and Comments on the General Catechetical Directory Issued by the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 1973), 13.

¹⁹ Häring’s three-volume work *Gesetz Christ* (1954) represents an effort to combine the insights of biblical scholarship with the standard pre-Vatican II genre of a moral manual. The work was translated into English as *The Law of Christ: Moral Theology for Priests and Laity*, 3 vols., trans. Edwin G. Kaiser (Westminster, MD: Edwin Newman Press, 1961).

Joseph Fuchs took teaching posts in Rome, they brought with them these new approaches to the discipline, ensuring the further dissemination of these ideas.²⁰ Such early work in the field and the awareness it created undoubtedly was behind the statement in the council's Decree on Priestly Formation that moral theology needed "livelier contact with the mystery of Christ" and that it should be "more thoroughly nourished by scriptural teaching."²¹ This summons was given further impetus by the robust affirmation of *Dei Verbum* that the study of sacred scripture is "the soul of sacred theology."²² This coupled with the council's employment of an inductive approach to engagement with the modern world in GS would seem to parallel the biblical and experiential turns in the catechetical movement albeit in less developed form.

The New Primacy of Experience

The shift to experience in the third phase of the catechetical movement that reached "a high-water mark" at Medellin and then was widely diffused in catechetical programs in the 1970s and 80s can be seen as part of a process of change that spanned much of the twentieth century.²³ This change was a kind of fermentation that produced a new mixture that then permeated the Church—a slow chemical reaction that changed the catechetical "solution" in significant ways. In spite of its broad influence and acceptance, this process of change was occasionally punctuated by rumbling reactions in the form of words of warning on the part of Church authority or by participants in the renewal themselves. Such rumblings came to a head in the controversy over the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC). By contrast, the field of moral theology after the council produced far more volatile compounds and as a result was wracked by an ongoing series of explosive debates and sharp confrontations at the heart of which was the effort to incorporate the turn to experience in new ways.

²⁰ See O'Connell, *Principles for a Catholic Morality*, 21; and Bohr, *Catholic Moral Tradition*, 73.

²¹ Second Vatican Council, Decree on Priestly Formation, *Optatum Totius* (1965) §16.

²² Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum* (1965) §24.

²³ The phrase is that of Mary Charles Bryce, "Evolution of Catechesis from the Catholic Reformation to the Present," in *A Faithful Church: Issues in the History of Catechesis*, ed. John H. Westerhoff III and O. C. Edwards Jr. (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1981), 228.

In the aftermath of the council there was some impetus for the promulgation of a new universal catechism; however, many bishops countered that in the face of growing theological and cultural diversity such a project was impracticable and undesirable—at least at that moment in time.²⁴ The publication of the *General Catechetical Directory* (GCD) can be understood as something of a compromise solution in this debate.²⁵ The GCD affirms many of the insights of the renewal and its various stages that preceded it, reconnecting the presentation of doctrine to the person of Jesus Christ consciously appropriated in the faith experience of adults.²⁶ However, it also contains some significant words of warning. Describing a kind of catechetical “crisis” facing the Church, the GCD warns on the one hand against those who oppose the movement of renewal altogether speaking of: “those who are unable to understand the depth of the proposed renewal, as though the issue here were merely one of eliminating ignorance of the doctrine which must be taught.” On the other hand, the document also warns against tendencies recognizable in the third stage, pointing to “those who are inclined to reduce the Gospel message to the consequences it has in men’s temporal existence.”²⁷ Pope Paul VI would reiterate a similar warning four years later in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*.²⁸

²⁴ A new universal catechism was championed in particular by Bishop Pierre Marie Laconte of France, who saw it as part of the unfinished business of Vatican I. Others pushed for a directory, however, which would be adapted to local and individual situations. See Marthaler, *Catechesis in Context*, xvi–xviii. Joseph Ratzinger, who would oversee the production of the CCC some decades later, also opposed a universal catechism immediately after the Council. He writes: “In 1966 the full extent of the problem had simply not become visible; that a process of fermentation had just begun which could lead only gradually to the clarifications necessary for a new common word.” See Joseph Ratzinger and Christoph Schönborn, *Introduction to the Catechism of the Catholic Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 12.

²⁵ The directory was promulgated by the Sacred Congregation for Clergy on April 11, 1971. For an overview of the GCD and its teaching see Marthaler, *Catechesis in Context*.

²⁶ Cf. GCD §20, 26, and 74. The shift as the primary objects of catechetical ministry from children to adults is itself a significant one, highlighting the gains of the renewal that preceded it. See Anne Marie Mongoven, “The Directories as Symbols of Catechetical Renewal,” in *The Echo Within: Emerging Issues in Religious Education*, eds. Catherine Dooley and Mary Collins (Allen, TX: Thomas More Publishing, 1997), 135.

²⁷ GCD, §9.

²⁸ “We must not ignore the fact that many, even generous Christians who are sensitive to the dramatic questions involved in the problem of liberation, in their wish to

The opposing assessments of both the needs of the Church and the trajectory of the third phase of the catechetical renewal came to a head in the controversy over Pope John Paul II's promulgation of the CCC, which first appeared in 1993. Opponents of the project saw it as a retreat from the work of the catechetical movement and the renewal it engendered, especially the embrace of the particularity of human experience, pluralism, and liberating praxis.²⁹ Its defenders saw it as an effort to integrate the whole of the Church's tradition with the insights of the modern catechetical movement (particularly the reconnection with scripture and the renewed focus on the Person of Christ) and as a corrective to some of the excesses of the third stage.³⁰ The slow chemical burn ignited in the third phase finally boiled over in full blown divisive controversy.

Even before this controversy erupted, the great catechetical scholar Johannes Hofinger sought to point a way forward for the catechetical movement. In an essay published in 1984 (the year of his death), Hofinger gave his own assessment of the renewal to date, describing the third

commit the Church to the liberation effort are frequently tempted to reduce her mission to the dimensions of a simply temporal project. They would reduce her aims to a man-centered goal; the salvation of which she is the messenger would be reduced to material well-being. Her activity, forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupation, would become initiatives of the political or social order. But if this were so, the Church would lose her fundamental meaning. Her message of liberation would no longer have any originality and would easily be open to monopolization and manipulation by ideological systems and political parties. She would have no more authority to proclaim freedom as in the name of God. This is why we have wished to emphasize, in the same address at the opening of the Synod, 'the need to restate clearly the specifically religious finality of evangelization. This latter would lose its reason for existence if it were to diverge from the religious axis that guides it: the kingdom of God, before anything else, in its fully theological meaning.'" Pope Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (1975) §32.

²⁹ Interestingly, the universal catechism faced criticism from its inception. At the time of its announcement the international journal *Concilium* devoted an entire issue to criticizing the very concept (see vol. 204 [1989]). The criticism continued after the appearance of the text. See, for example, the generally critical essays contained in the volume *Introducing the Catechism of the Catholic Church: Traditional Themes and Contemporary Issues*, ed. Berard J. Marthaler (New York: Paulist, 1994).

³⁰ See, for example, Avery Dulles, S.J., "The Challenge of Catechism," *First Things* 49 (1995): 46–53; and Joseph Ratzinger, "Handing on the Faith and the Sources of Faith," in Joseph Ratzinger, Dermott J. Ryan, Godfried Danneels, and Francis Marcharski, *Handing on Faith in an Age of Disbelief*, trans. Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 15. Ratzinger's essay was originally delivered as a lecture in 1983.

phase as a kind of “eulogy” to the movement that itself needed to be transcended in “a fourth phase still to come.”³¹ He likened the movement’s work and their stages to the construction of a building. The pioneers of the first stage laid the foundation on which the kerygmatic approach erected walls. The anthropological and experiential turn of the third phase produced a roof but left it lying on the ground next to the structure. The phase still to come must raise this roof and set it on the walls of the structure—experience must be reconnected with doctrine and the Person of Christ.³²

The recent history of moral theology shows it to be even more combustible than catechetics, but once again it has been the notion of experience that has provided much of the fuel for the controversy. As is well known, it was only the intervention of Pope Paul VI and his expansion of the study commission created by his predecessor John XXIII that enabled the fathers of the Second Vatican Council to avoid being sidetracked by the emerging and contentious debate over oral contraception (“the Pill”).³³ On this commission it was both the failure of traditional neo-scholastic natural law arguments often heavily colored by physicalism (itself a fruit of nominalism) as well as the voices of lay members drawing on their own experience, which tipped a majority of members to advocate for a revision of the traditional teaching.³⁴ Revisionist thinkers often pointed to the experience of couples

³¹ Johannes Hofinger, “Looking Backward and Forward: Journey of Catechesis,” *The Living Light* 20 (1984): 348–57, here 355. On the significance of these remarks, see Pedraza, “Reform and Renewal in Catechesis,” 27–28.

³² Ibid., 356. Elsewhere he would write: “By the time [the GCD] and the *National Catechetical Directory of Catholics* in the United States appeared, religious education had been unfavorably influenced by formidable waves of secularism and an unwillingness to accept the normative directions of the Church.” Johannes Hofinger, “The Catechetical Sputnik,” in *Modern Masters of Religious Education*, ed. Marlene Mayr (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1983), 32.

³³ See William H. Shannon, *The Lively Debate: Response to Humanae vitae* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1970), 46–50, 52–54; and John T. Noonan, *Contraception: A History of Its Treatment by the Catholic Theologians and Canonists*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1986), 469–71.

³⁴ Journalist Robert McClory emphasizes the experiential testimony of lay members of the commission in his *Turning Point: The Inside Story of the Papal Birth Control Commission, & How Humanae Vitae Changed the Life of Patty Crowley and the Future of the Church* (New York: Crossroad, 1995).

whom they had counseled as causing them to rethink the traditional teaching.³⁵

After the unexpected reaffirmation of the teaching by Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the ensuing firestorm of debate spawned whole new moral methodologies that sought, among other things, to provide justification for the judgment of individuals and couples who on the basis of their consciences and experience rejected the norm proposed by the Pope. Modern Catholic proportionalism with its elaborate weighing of the balance of premoral goods or evils in the human act considered in its totality was a sophisticated elaboration of a basis for just such an individual and experiential approach to moral reasoning. In many ways it represents a reprise of the case-based moral reasoning of the manuals in the new context of the ongoing critique of the encyclical, but instead of privileging the opinions of authorities in the resolution of conflict cases, that weight was now given to individual conscience in the concreteness of the situation.³⁶ Other less widely imitated revisionist methodologies would also give

³⁵ Charles Curran provides an example, though he makes the argument differently at different points in his career. In his early work before the encyclical he cites the difficulty experienced by couples struggling to live according to the Church's teaching. See, for example, "Family Planning," in *Christian Morality Today: The Renewal of Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides, 1966), 47–64, esp. 47–48. In his later work he points to the example of John R. Cavanagh, a member of the papal birth control commission who was influenced by survey results of couples who had negative experiences of "rhythm" as well as his own experience as a psychiatrist, which moved him to advocate for a change in the teaching. See "Theory and Practice; Faith and Reason: A Case Study of John R. Cavanagh," in *Critical Concerns in Moral Theology* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 203–32, esp. 221–24. Curran also begins to utilize social scientific data to ground his advocacy for "pastoral solutions" to difficulties posed by Church teaching. See his "The Pastoral Minister, the Moral Demands of Discipleship and the Conscience of the Believer," in *Critical Concerns in Moral Theology*, 233–56.

³⁶ For some of the historical parallels between modern casuistry and this approach, see Thomas Shannon, "Method in Ethics: A Scotist Contribution," in *Context of Casuistry*, 3–24, esp. 3–4. For a sympathetic historical account of the genesis of this method as a whole, see Bernard Hoose, *Proportionalism: The American Debate and Its European Roots* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1987). For incisive critiques of the method as modern casuistry, see Servais Pinckaers, O.P., "La question des actes intrinsèquement mauvais et le 'proportionalisme,'" *Revue thomiste* 83 (1982): 181–212; and Christopher Kaczor, *Proportionalism and the Natural Law Tradition* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2011).

new weight to the concept of experience—for example, the effort to understand human sexual activity in descriptive/experiential categories in the infamous 1977 C.T.S.A. report.³⁷

However, the herald and bellwether of the new role of experience in Catholic moral theology in the United States has been Charles Curran. This can be seen in a number of ways. First, in formulating his own methodology to ground a critical stance toward *Humanae Vitae*, he outlined a “relational responsibility” approach to the moral life (his own blending of Niebuhrian ethics, American pragmatism, and an eclectic borrowing of proportionalist terminology from his close collaborator Richard McCormick, S.J., and others).³⁸ Second, Curran has long been at the forefront of the argument that Catholic Social Teaching around the time of the council underwent a methodological shift from a deductive and classicist approach in its moral reasoning to a historically conscious, inductive, and experiential approach.³⁹ The shift is sometimes attributed to John XXIII in *Pacem in Terris* but more frequently to the council’s Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. The same shift has not occurred in Catholic sexual and biomedical ethics, leaving the Church’s teaching in a “schizophrenic” state vacillating between conflicting worldviews

³⁷ See Anthony Kosnick et al., *Human Sexuality: New Directions in American Catholic Thought* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1977). The work argued that the tradition criteria for evaluating sex should be broadened from “unitive and procreative” to “creative and integrative,” with the understanding that these categories entailed that sexual expression must be self-liberating, other-enriching, honest, faithful, socially responsible, life-serving, and joyous (see esp. 86–95). Critics of the work pointed out that such fuzzy experiential criteria could not effectively rule out any form of sexual expression with the possible exception of bestiality. Cf. James Burtchaell, *The Giving and Taking of Life: Essays Ethical* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989), 288.

³⁸ For largely sympathetic overviews and analyses of Curran’s thought and its development, see the essays collected in *A Call to Fidelity: On the Moral Theology of Charles E. Curran*, Moral Traditions Series, ed. James J. Walter, Timothy O’Connell, and Thomas Shannon (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002).

³⁹ For an overview and critique of Curran’s position and its widespread impact, see John S. Grabowski and Michael Naughton, “Catholic Sexual or Social Teaching: Inconsistent or Organic?” *The Thomist* 57 (1993): 555–78. For a more recent version of Curran’s argument, see his *Catholic Social Teaching 1891–Present: A Historical, Theological and Ethical Analysis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), esp. 23–37, 53–96.

and methodologies.⁴⁰ Third, in his work as a historian and commentator on the field, Curran has called attention to the recent adoption by many Catholic moralists of the “Wesleyan Quadrilateral” of sources for ethical reasoning: experience, Scripture, tradition, and reason. This approach characterizes the work of prominent revisionist scholars such as Lisa Sowle Cahill, Margaret Farley, Todd Salzmänn, Michael Lawler, and, in his current work, Curran himself.⁴¹

The listing of experience in the first position among these sources is not an accident. It is, both implicitly and in some cases explicitly, the dominant source, being used at times as a “trump” to scripture or the Church’s tradition on particular points such as the approval of sexual activity on the part of certain same-sex couples. There is some divergence among these moralists as to whether experience is best understood through social scientific study and data (Cahill)⁴² or personal and even anecdotal experience (Farley)⁴³ or some mixture of them (Salzmänn and

⁴⁰ For conflicting views on the “schizophrenia,” see John S. Grabowski and Michael Naughton, “Doctrinal Development: Does It Apply to Family and Sex,” *Commonweal* 124, no. 13 (1997): 18–20, and the reply by Charles Curran in *ibid.*, 20.

⁴¹ See Charles Curran, *Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 48. Cf. Michael G. Lawler and Todd Salzman, “Human Experience and Catholic Moral Theology,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 76 (2011): 35–56.

⁴² See, for example, her somewhat complex argument in *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). Cahill draws primarily on social scientific research to ascertain “goods” integral to human flourishing (46–72); views sexual orientation (and the body more generally) as largely socially constructed (97–102); and, finding biblical condemnations of homosexual activity to be ambiguous and inconclusive (156–60), she opts to give more weight to the biblical themes of compassion and solidarity with the marginalized. All of this means that incorporating homosexual people with the Christian community “does not necessarily denigrate the ideals of virginity . . . of faithful, mutual heterosexual marriage” (158), especially when their experience can be understood as conducive to their human flourishing (as measured through social scientific criteria).

⁴³ See Margaret Farley, R.S.M., *Just Love: A Framework for Christian Sexual Ethics* (New York: Continuum, 2008). Like Cahill, Farley sees Scripture and tradition as ambiguous and inconclusive as sources for a contemporary evaluation of same-sex relationships (273–80). But while she finds that the sciences contribute useful information to understanding the reality of sexual orientation and preference, she finds them inconclusive for formulating a moral evaluation (280–86). She therefore turns to experience to determine whether such activity can conduce to human flourishing. And by experience she specifies that she means “primarily the testimony of women

Lawler).⁴⁴ It is this methodology in which experience is given pride of place and the conclusions it has generated, which has occasioned public negative evaluations of recent works in sexual ethics by Church authorities.⁴⁵ The category of experience thus continues to be the fuel that ignites explosive public controversy in Catholic moral theology.

My contention is that the fundamental flaw in such works is not that they engage experience, but that they misrepresent its place in the theological endeavor. By exaggerating its importance and using it to “trump” Scripture, tradition, or moral norms grounded in reason’s apprehension of human nature, experience is given an exaggerated and even distorted importance. Experience becomes the primary *locus theologicus* overriding and reshaping the other sources. Furthermore, there does not seem to be adequate recognition of the fact that human experience is itself distorted and wounded by the presence and effects of sin in the human person and in the world around him or her. Authentic Christian experience is not an independent source standing outside of the tradition—it is the fruit of the encounter with the person of Christ. Hence to address the questions and controversies that experience has generated in the histories of both catechetics and moral theology, we need to refocus the theological endeavor on this transforming encounter. This is, in fact, the path to renewal marked out in the teaching of the council itself and in subsequent documents that continue its trajectory.

and men whose sexual preference is for others of the same sex” (286–88; here 286).

⁴⁴ See Todd Salzman and Michael Lawler, *The Sexual Person: Toward a Renewed Anthropology*, Moral Traditions Series (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2008), 228–29. Other scholars point to accounts of experience embedded in literature or art. For the former, see Anna Marie Vigen, “Conclusion,” in *God, Science, Sex and Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics*, ed. Patricia Beatrice Jung and Anna Marie Vigen (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 240. For the latter, see John Corvino, *What’s Wrong with Homosexuality?* (New York: Oxford, University Press 2013), 16.

⁴⁵ The works in question are Farley’s *Just Love* and Salzman and Lawler’s *Sexual Person*. On September 15, 2010, the USCCB Committee on Doctrine issued a public statement calling attention to problems of both method and conclusions in Salzman and Lawler’s text (including but not limited to those on same-sex relationships). Two years later on June 4, 2012, the C.D.F. published a notification on Farley’s book, citing both general and specific problems in the work. For the text of the notification, see http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20120330_nota-farley_en.html.

The Encounter with Christ as the Heart of the Church and Theology

In differing ways both Pope John Paul II and Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI have sought to focus the attention of the Church and its intellectual endeavors on the encounter with the Person of Christ, which is at the heart of Christian life. In so doing they saw themselves as carrying forward and implementing the renewal begun at the Second Vatican Council. This focus has become programmatic in the pontificate of Pope Francis.⁴⁶

In his apostolic exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* given at the beginning of his pontificate (1979), Pope John Paul II pointed to Christ as the heart of the ministry of catechesis:

at the heart of catechesis we find, in essence, a Person, the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, “the only Son from the Father . . . full of grace and truth,” who suffered and died for us and who now, after rising, is living with us forever. It is Jesus who is “the way, and the truth, and the life,” and Christian living consists in following Christ, the *sequela Christi* . . . Accordingly, the definitive aim of catechesis is to put people not only in touch but in communion, in intimacy, with Jesus Christ: only He can lead us to the love of the Father in the Spirit and make us share in the life of the Holy Trinity.⁴⁷

The ministry of catechesis exists to put the Church and its members in conscious contact—“in communion”—with the Person of Jesus Christ. We can debate how well the CCC and its various parts accomplish this, but this is undoubtedly its aim as John Paul II would indicate in the constitution that promulgated it.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Thus in the first major document of his pontificate, which was largely his own, he wrote: “I invite all Christians, everywhere, at this very moment, to a renewed personal encounter with Jesus Christ, or at least an openness to letting him encounter them; I ask all of you to do this unfailingly each day. No one should think that this invitation is not meant for him or her, since ‘no one is excluded from the joy brought by the Lord.’” Pope Francis, Apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* (2013) §3, citing Pope Paul VI, Apostolic exhortation, *Gaudete in Domino* (1975) §22.

⁴⁷ *Catechesi Tradendae* §5.

⁴⁸ See John Paul II, Apostolic Constitution, *Fidei Depositum* (1992) §2: “In reading the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we can perceive the wondrous unity of the mystery of God, his saving will, as well as the central place of Jesus Christ, the on-

Some fourteen years later, addressing the even more tumultuous field of moral theology in the first chapter of his encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*, John Paul II would restate the import of this personal encounter in even more sweeping and (literally) dramatic terms. The problem is that most commentators on the document, fixating on the technical analysis of controversial issues in its second chapter (particularly the negative evaluation of proportionalism's appeal to individual conscience and the experience of action in its concreteness to override absolute moral norms) have virtually ignored the genuinely revolutionary character of this teaching. This neglect is equally evident by both revisionist critics of the document as well as many of its traditionalist defenders.⁴⁹

Commenting on the encounter between Christ and the Rich Young man of Matthew 19, John Paul sees him as a type of "every person, who consciously or not, *approaches Christ the Redeemer of man and questions him about morality.*"⁵⁰ He is thus identified as a type of "Adam"—a John Q. Everyman who wrestles with the nature of the moral good and questions about the ultimate purpose of life. Readers are thus encouraged to identify themselves with the figure of the Young Man and to hear Jesus's words as addressed to the questions arising within their own hearts.⁵¹ The pope draws upon his own early work as playwright to invite readers of the encyclical to hear themselves addressed by Christ as participants in an existential drama.

ly-begotten Son of God, sent by the Father, made man in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary by the power of the Holy Spirit, to be our Saviour. Having died and risen, Christ is always present in his Church, especially in the sacraments; he is the source of our faith, the model of Christian conduct and the Teacher of our prayer." Reflecting on the CCC, Joseph Ratzinger observes that writing the third part "was no doubt the most difficult" and that "it does not claim to offer the only possible or even the best systematic formulation of moral theology." See his "Is the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* Up-to Date?" in *On the Way to Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005), 140–63; here 159.

⁴⁹ See the overview of the debate and the literature in John S. Grabowski, "The Luminous Excess of the Acting Person: Assessing the Impact of Pope John Paul II on American Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Moral Theology* 1, no. 1 (2012): 116–47, esp. 136–44. Parts of the following two paragraphs are adapted from that essay (see 141–42).

⁵⁰ Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Veritatis splendor* (1993) §7.

⁵¹ This chapter of Matthew's Gospel serves "as a useful guide for listening once more in a lively and direct way to [Jesus'] . . . moral teaching." *Veritatis Splendor* §6 (emphasis in original).

In John Paul II's presentation of this drama, which unfolds on the stage of the Gospel account, the reference to the commandments serve not to articulate a law-centered morality as some critics alleged, but to highlight the invitation to discipleship as a gift of grace. The commandments themselves are reflective of God's covenantal invitation to humanity, but "not even the most rigorous observance of the commandments, succeeds in 'fulfilling' the Law."⁵² Instead, human beings still find themselves enslaved to the power of sin that makes God's law appear as an alien intrusion upon their autonomy.⁵³ The Young Man, like Adam after his Fall, is unable to respond on his own volition—he finds himself impotent in the face of a call to perfection that requires "maturity in self-giving"—itself a gift of grace.⁵⁴ Discipleship requires not merely outward conformity of behavior but an interior transformation of the person mediated through the Church's sacramental worship, which provides the "source and power" of the gift of self in love in union with Christ's own Eucharistic self-gift.⁵⁵ Following Jesus is therefore not exterior imitation based on moral rules, but the communication of a new interior life in Christ lived through the Holy Spirit who is Himself the "new law" of Christian life.⁵⁶ It is this transforming encounter that bestows the happiness that the Young Man seeks.⁵⁷

Oliver O'Donovan was one of the few commentators on the document who recognized the genuinely transformative character of its first chapter: "Not everyone has appreciated its innovative strength as a programme for moral theology . . . in these pages which shape the moral discourse of the Church as an evangelical proclamation."⁵⁸ *Veritatis Splendor* is indeed revolutionary for the discipline of moral theol-

⁵² Ibid., §11.

⁵³ Cf. *ibid.*, §17–18.

⁵⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, §17.

⁵⁵ Ibid., §21.

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, §24, echoing the teaching of St. Thomas in *ST* I-II, q. 106, a. 1. On this theme of transformation in the document (issued on the Feast of the Transfiguration), see J. A. DiNoia, O.P., "The Moral Life as Transfigured Life," in *Veritatis splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology* (Princeton, NJ: Scepter, 1999), 1–10.

⁵⁷ On the eudaimonism of the document, see Livio Melina, "The Desire for Happiness and the Commandments in the First Chapter of *Veritatis Splendor*," in *Veritatis splendor and the Renewal of Moral Theology*, 143–60.

⁵⁸ "A Summons to Reality," in *Considering Veritatis Splendor*, ed. John Wilkins (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1994), 41–45; here 42. Cf. the assessment of Lorenzo Albacete, "The Relevance of Christ or the *sequela Christi*," *Communio* 21 (1994): 255.

ogy—and for theology generally—in at least three distinct ways. First, this invitation to discipleship is not addressed to an elite few (the traditional Catholic understanding), but to all. The universal call to holiness reaffirmed at Vatican II is here rearticulated through the dramatic call to the perfection of discipleship given to the Young Man.⁵⁹ Second, the purpose of the Church's life and mission is refocused on this encounter: “*In order to make this ‘encounter’ with Christ possible, God willed his Church.*”⁶⁰ Some of the implications of this sweeping statement have begun to take shape in the current ministry and teaching of Pope Francis.⁶¹ Third, and most directly pertinent to the concern of this study, is that the encounter with the Person of Christ is made the hermeneutical key to understand experience—both human and Christian. Christ reveals the contents of the human heart to those who encounter him—the experience of impotence in the face of the struggle with sin, himself as the concrete fulfillment of the hunger for happiness and love, and the liberating freedom of the grace-empowered “yes” of discipleship.

I would argue that this evangelical and Christological turn of *Veritatis Splendor* is an effort to reconnect with and extend the trajectory for renewal mapped out in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*. In an essay written shortly before his election as pope, Joseph Ratzinger describes *Veritatis Splendor* as an effort to reconnect with the council's great themes of Scripture, Christology, and human reason. The efforts to implement the biblical dimension of this renewal were stymied by a variety of factors: the complexity of contemporary problems that seem to go beyond the resources of scriptural wisdom, the diversity and difficulty of biblical materials themselves, and the ecumenical context in the Bible was read and applied to ethical matters.⁶²

On his elevation to the Chair of Peter, Pope Benedict XVI continued

⁵⁹ “*The invitation, ‘go sell your possessions and give money to the poor,’ and the promise ‘you will have treasure in heaven,’ are meant for everyone, because they bring out the full meaning of the commandment of love of neighbor, just as the invitation which follows, ‘Come follow me,’ is the new, specific form of the commandment of love of God.*” *Veritatis Splendor* §18 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, §7.

⁶¹ It is certainly apparent in his Apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*. See note 47 above.

⁶² See Ratzinger, “Renewal of Moral Theology,” 359–62. To this list might be added the bitterly divisive controversy of the birth control debate in the Church.

to focus the Church on the Person of Christ and on the council's program of renewal. In the beginning of his first encyclical, Pope Benedict wrote: "*We have come to believe in God's love*: in these words the Christian can express the fundamental decision of his life. Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction." For Benedict, however, a proper hermeneutic of tradition was an integral part of this program of renewal.⁶³ In his first Christmas address to the Roman curia he contrasted a "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture" with one of "reform and renewal." Of the former, he said:

The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks ending in a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church. It asserts that the texts of the Council as such do not yet express the true spirit of the Council. It claims that they are the result of compromises in which, to reach unanimity, it was found necessary to keep and reconfirm many old things that are now pointless. However, the true spirit of the Council is not to be found in these compromises but instead in the impulses toward the new that are contained in the texts.⁶⁴

By contrast, Pope Benedict described the hermeneutic of reform and renewal as follows:

Here I shall cite only John XXIII's well-known words, which unequivocally express this hermeneutic when he says that the Council wishes "to transmit the doctrine, pure and integral, without any attenuation or distortion." And he continues: "Our duty is not only to guard this precious treasure, as if we were concerned only with antiquity, but to dedicate ourselves with an earnest will and without fear to that work which our era demands of us" . . . It is necessary that "adherence to all the teach-

⁶³ *Deus Caritas Est* (2005) §1 (emphasis in original).

⁶⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, "Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Roman Curia Offering Them His Christmas Greetings," December 22, 2005). From http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2005/december/documents/hf_ben_xvi_spe_20051222_roman-curia_en.html.

ing of the Church in its entirety and preciseness” . . . be presented in “faithful and perfect conformity to the authentic doctrine, which, however, should be studied and expounded through the methods of research and through the literary forms of modern thought. The substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another” . . . retaining the same meaning and message.⁶⁶

In other words, the updating in light of contemporary questions and experience for which the council called (*aggiornamento*) cannot be separated from its program of returning to the sources of faith (*ressourcement*).⁶⁷

It is true that the Pastoral Constitution offers for the first time in a conciliar document an extended treatment of human person and his or her experience in the modern world.⁶⁸ The very complexity of modern life, the advancements of human science and technology, render the human person increasingly opaque to him or herself. In analyzing and addressing this problem anthropology becomes “the Archimedean point” and unifying center of the document.⁶⁹ Yet if anthropology is the starting point and hinge of the Pastoral Constitution, Christology is the key to its understanding of the human person. In a famous text the council fathers write:

The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first man, was a figure of Him Who was to come, namely Christ the Lord. Christ, the final Adam, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear. It is not surprising, then, that in Him all the aforementioned truths find their root and attain their crown.⁶⁹

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Marcellino D'Ambrosio observes that *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* were “inextricably intertwined” in *la nouvelle théologie*, which preceded the Council. See his essay “*Ressourcement* Theology, *aggiornamento*, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition,” *Communio* 18 (1991): 530–55.

⁶⁸ On the novelty of GS in this regard, see Walter Kasper, “The Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et spes*,” *Communio* 23 (1996): 129–40, esp. 129.

⁶⁹ The term is that of *ibid.*, 133–34.

⁶⁹ GS, §22, The citation is from *The Documents of Vatican II*, 220. Walter Kasper calls

Even the widely hailed inductive approach to “reading the signs of the times” is put in the eschatological and Christological framework of the Gospel’s use of the phrase.⁷⁰ While the final text of GS does not invoke Matthew 16:1–4, it retains its meaning: “To carry out such a task the Church has always had *the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times* and of interpreting them in the light of the gospel.”⁷¹

It is thus possible to read the first chapter of *Veritatis Splendor* as a commentary and elaboration of the teaching of GS no. 22 as to how “Christ reveals us to ourselves.”⁷² Included in this revelation is an illumination of both the person’s interior life (“the heart”)—its hungers, aspirations, and darkness—and the world in which the person lives—a world also comprised of both lights and shadows. Experience—both human and Christian—is neither wholly good or bad but it is fundamentally opaque without the light of Christ.

Authentic Christian experience is born from the life-changing encounter of the human person with Jesus Christ. It is first and foremost a fruit of this encounter—not an autonomous higher vantage from which to critique the sources through which this encounter is mediated (Scripture and the liturgical worship of the Church).⁷³ Neither should it be

this statement “the standard and short form of the Pastoral Constitution.” Kasper, “Theological Anthropology of *Gaudium et spes*,” 137.

⁷⁰ The phrase “signs of the times” was first used by John XXIII in *Humanae Salutis* (1961) referencing Mt 16:1–4. Early drafts of GS equated the phrase with the Roman phrase *vox temporis, vox dei*—an understanding at odds with the Christological and eschatological overtones of Mt 16:1–4.

⁷¹ GS, §4 (emphasis added). The original Latin text reads: “Ad tale munus exsequendum, per omne tempus Ecclesiae officium incumbit signa temporum perscrutandi et sub Evangelii luce interpretandi.” The citation is from http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_lt.html.

⁷² It bears remembering that this text was a hermeneutical key to the teaching of Pope John Paul II as a whole and that Karol Wojtyła was one of the authors of GS.

⁷³ Aidan Nichols makes the point forcefully: “I can never appeal to Christian experience against that Church in order to deny its common faith or disparage its common life. To appeal away from the Church would be to cut off the branch on which I am sitting, to cut myself off from the source of experience I am claiming, to commit epistemological suicide. Experience is only an aid to discernment; it is not itself the living source of enlightenment in Christian theology.” *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to Its Sources, Principles, and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 246.

conceived as an independent and coequal source alongside of Scripture, tradition, and reason.⁷⁴ And such experience does not simply emerge spontaneously from within persons and communities—even those engaged in the noble struggle for justice and human dignity. Instead, as the fruit of the encounter with the Redeemer of the human race, experience can be likened to the “matter” of the theological enterprise to which revelation corresponds as its form.

Confession, Conversion, and Healing: Insights from the Doctor of Grace

Understanding Christian experience as the fruit of the encounter with the Person of Christ is neither a return to some form of ancient Gnosticism nor a species of modern fideism.⁷⁵ In many ways it marks a recovery of early Christianity’s understanding of the relationship of Christ to the world and to humanity. It is not accidental that the Christological anthropology of GS has deep biblical and patristic roots as it reflects the renewal of patristic studies that flowered in the *ressourcement* prior to the council.⁷⁶

A very brief consideration of the thought of one particularly important Western patristic author can serve to illustrate the point—St. Augustine of Hippo. Augustine’s *Confessions*, written a few years after his ordination as a bishop, offers a uniquely Christian autobiographical

⁷⁴ Both Wesley himself and subsequent generations of Methodist teachers were clear that Scripture was the ruling source in this quadrilateral—in Scripture Christian faith is revealed and then subsequently illumined by tradition brought to life in the experience of the believer and finally confirmed by reason. On this, see the essays in W. Stephen Gunter, Scott Jones, Ted Campbell, Rebekah Miles, and Randy Maddox, *Wesley and the Quadrilateral: Renewing the Conversation* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1997).

⁷⁵ In this I disagree with the assessment of Lisa Sowle Cahill, who raised the specter of fideism in her reaction to *Veritatis Splendor*, warning of “its confessional and even fideist mode which pulls the rug out from under the Church’s moral theologian’s credibility as advocates of the human and the common goods.” See “*Veritatis Splendor*,” *Commonweal* 120, no. 14 (1993): 15–16.

⁷⁶ In terms of such roots one could point to the Pauline notion of Christ as the Second Adam, or the New Testament’s understanding of Christ as the image of God. Such notions are developed in the thought of fathers such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory Nazianzus, among others. In the case of Gregory, scholars have argued that his experience of Christ is a key to the whole of his Christology. See Andrew Hofer, O.P., *Christ in the Life and Teaching of Gregory of Nazianzus*, Oxford Early Christian Studies (New York: Oxford University, 2013).

reflection on this encounter in a style accessible to the classical tastes of late Roman culture.⁷⁷ His shocking (to his contemporaries) discussion of his vices and the sway that they exercised over his mind and will as he wandered far from God the source of truth and happiness, the breakthroughs of truth in his restless search culminating in the dramatic *tolle lege* moment in the garden of Milan, and the liberating illumination of his conversion and baptism offer a kind of phenomenology of the hermeneutic function of the encounter with Christ described above.

In this phenomenology, “confession” becomes a key to healing and renewal. Reviewing the sins of his past life, Augustine says that “the recalling of my wicked ways is bitter in my memory but I do it so that you may be sweet to me.”⁷⁸ His vicious actions had forged for him “a chain to hold me prisoner.” He continues, “By servitude to passion, habit is formed, and habit to which there is no resistance becomes necessity. By these links, as it were, connected one to another . . . a harsh bondage held me under restraint.”⁷⁹ Like the Prodigal son of the Gospel he wandered far from God and in so doing lost himself.⁸⁰ Conversely, in finding God Augustine finds himself because God is “more inward than my most inward part.”⁸¹ Yet this interior has depths that are ultimately impenetrable to human introspection. In his long prayer, he confesses the inscrutability of his own heart and motives: “How does it come about that the various kinds of love are felt in a single soul with different degrees of weight . . . Man is a vast deep, whose hairs you, Lord, have numbered . . . Yet it is easier to count his hairs than the passions and emotions of his heart.”⁸²

⁷⁷ For an overview of the *Confessions* in their historical and literary context, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo: A Biography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), esp. 151–75. Brown vacillates between characterizing the work as conventional and iconoclastic in terms of Roman and Christian literary antecedents.

⁷⁸ *Confessions*, II, I, 1. The citation is from the translation by Henry Chadwick for *Oxford's World's Classics Series* (1992; revised edition; New York: Oxford University, 2008), 24. All citations are to this version.

⁷⁹ *Confessions*, VIII, v, 10 (p. 140).

⁸⁰ The biblical prodigal son is a recurring allusion in the narrative of the *Confessions*. See II, x, 18; III, vi, 11; IV xvi, 30; V, xii, 22.

⁸¹ *Confessions*, III, vi, 11 (p. 43). The original is *intimior intimo meo*. In this vein, Brown describes the *Confessions* as a “manifesto of the inner world.” See *Augustine of Hippo*, 161.

⁸² *Confessions*, IV, xiv, 22 (p. 66).

His encounter with Christ liberated him, like Lazarus from the tomb, from the “pile of bad habits” under which he lay dead, but he would still have to “come out” and “accuse . . . [himself] . . . in confession.”⁸³ But even then the human heart remains frail and inscrutable so Augustine begs the source of this healing and transforming grace: “grant what you command, and command what you will.”⁸⁴ Even as a bishop, Augustine regards himself as a convalescent receiving therapy.⁸⁵ It is this knowledge of himself gained from his own experience of struggle, failure, and progressive healing, that leads the bishop of Hippo to frequently describe Christ as the divine physician: “The Lord, though, like an experienced doctor, knew better what was going on in the sick man, than the sick man himself. Doctors do for the indispositions of bodies what the Lord can also do for the indisposition of souls.”⁸⁶ The hospital used by this Divine Doctor is the Church: “Let us, the wounded, entreat the physician, let us be carried to the inn to be healed . . . therefore Brothers, in this time the Church too, in which the wounded man is healed, is the inn of the traveler.”⁸⁸ The scriptures provide the convalescing Christian with the grammar to describe his or her experience of captivity, release, and transformation by grace. They are also the means by which the Divine Physician imparts healing through the medium of human words.⁸⁹

⁸³ *Serm.* 67, 2. The citation is from *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons III* (51-98), trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City, 1993), 216.

⁸⁴ *Confessions*, X, xxix, 40 (p. 202). Brown notes that this prayerful refrain was one of the things that shocked Pelagius in his reading of the *Confessions* (see *Augustine of Hippo*, 173).

⁸⁵ Brown points us to book X in this regard: “For the insistence on treatment by ‘confession’ has followed Augustine into his present life. The amazing book ten of the *Confessions* is not the affirmation of a cured man; it is the self-portrait of a convalescent.” See *Augustine of Hippo*, 170–71.

⁸⁶ *Serm.*, 229O. The citation is from *The Works of St. Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century, Sermons III/6* (184–229Z), trans. Edmund Hill, O.P., ed. John Rotelle, O.S.A. (New York: New City, 1993), 323. For other instances in which Augustine describes salvation in medical terms, see *Serm.* 229E (ibid., 283); *Confessions VII*, xx, 26; X, xxx, 42; *De doctrina christiana* 1, 27; 4, 95; *Enchiridion* 3.11; 22.81; 23. 92; 32.121; *De nuptiis*, bk. 2, 9. III; 38. XXIII.

⁸⁷ *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 41.13.2. The citation is from *Saint Augustine Tractates on the Gospel of John* 28–54, trans. John W. Rettig (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 148–49.

⁸⁸ “With Augustine we find the roots of a genuinely scriptural form of pragmatism

The Psalms do this in a particular way as they describe the full range of human experience and emotion and because they are the prayer of Christ himself in the members of his body.⁹⁰ The ministry of catechesis aims to penetrate both the hearts and minds of those it forms with the grammar and reality of this graced experience.⁹¹

To use a contemporary example of a similar understanding of this kind of engagement with experience, one can consult the recovery literature of present-day twelve-step programs. The experience of addiction to a particular behavior or substance brings the person to an awareness of his or her own powerlessness, often described as “hitting bottom.” Having accepted the reality of this hopeless situation, the person then makes a decision to turn his or her life over to the care and power of a loving God—what the Christian might describe as a “conversion.” The new reality imparted by this psychic change is not an end in itself; instead it must be reinforced by a series of practices that develop new habits of living and interaction and deepen the person’s ongoing dependence on God. The literature of the program in which the person is engaged provides a grammar to describe an experience that is at once individual and shared—both the experience of the hopelessness of addiction and the grace of recovery.

The theology of the Doctor of Grace, particularly his formulation of the doctrine of original sin, makes clear that this is the human condition generally. Human beings are all fallen in Adam, infected by the restless burning of the disordered forms of *concupiscentia* that drive us to seek our happiness in creatures when our hearts are only satisfied by their Cre-

aimed at healing the world through the Word.” C. C. Pecknold, *Transforming Post-liberal Theology: George Lindbeck, Pragmatism and Scripture* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 60. For an overview of Augustine’s view of Scripture, see Tarmo Toom, “Augustine on Scripture,” in *The T&T Clark Companion to Augustine and Modern Theology*, ed. C. C. Pecknold and Tarmo Toom (London: T&T Clark, 2013), 75–90.

⁸⁹ See *Confessions* IX, xi, 8–11. On this, see Brown, *Augustine of Hippo*, 171–72, esp. 254: “The Psalms were the record of the emotions of Christ and His members. Just as he had taken on human flesh, so Christ had, opened himself to human feeling.” Others have pointed to the Gospel’s portrayal of Christ as making the prayer of the Psalms his own. See the outstanding study by Mary Healy, “The Hermeneutic of Jesus,” *Communio* 37 (2010): 477–95.

⁹⁰ For an excellent and in-depth overview of Augustine’s understanding of the ministry of catechesis, see William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995).

ator.⁹¹ The experience of such fallen creatures is a perilous foundation for the search for truth, subject as it is to the vicissitudes of darkened minds, warring hearts, and interior depths that exceed the person's own ability to plumb. Even the convalescent Christian—"the recovering sinner"—following the transforming encounter with Christ must continue to habituate him or herself to the healing effects of grace made available in the Church and its sacraments and use the literature and language of the community (i.e., the scriptures) to learn to rightly evaluate and characterize personal experience both past and present.⁹² Appeals to the category of experience in theology—whether in catechetics or moral theology—must be subject to this sober form of Christian realism that Augustine exemplifies. Thus the recovery of Christian experience depends in many respects upon understanding it as an experience of recovery.⁹³

⁹¹ Cf. *Confessions* I, i, 1. Augustine follows 1 Jn 2:15–16 in describing a threefold disorder within the fallen human being: "Do not love the world or the things of the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, sensual lust, enticement for the eyes, and a pretentious life, is not from the Father but is from the world" (New American Bible). For the Bishop of Hippo, baptism removes the guilt of original sin but not the disorder created by it (cf. *De nuptiis* bk. 1, 25. XXIII; 28. XXV). The "concupiscence of the flesh" (*concupiscentia carnis*) may be utilized "without fault" in marriage when directed to the good of the procreation of children (cf. *De Bono conjugali* 6). In the prelapsarian state, sexual desire would have been ordered because it would have been governed by the will (see *De nuptiis* bk. 2, 59. XXXV; *De civitate dei* bk. 14, 10, 15–19). For an excellent overview of Augustine's complex views of sexual desire, see John Cavadini, "Feeling Right: Augustine on the Passions and Sexual Desire," *Augustinian Studies* 36, no. 1 (2005): 195–217.

⁹² This is an example of what it means to hold that experience provides the "matter" of theological reflection to which revelation gives form. Nichols argues that experience and the magisterium are the "aids" to understanding the sources of theology such as Scripture and tradition. The first of these he characterizes as "situated at the subjective pole of ecclesial life" and the second at its "objective pole," but both are thoroughly ecclesial. See Nichols, *Shape of Catholic Theology*, 235–47; here 235.

⁹³ Others have drawn upon Augustine's powerful account of the enslaving power of habit and the impotence of the human will to consider addiction and recovery from a Christian theological perspective. See, for example, the study of Christopher C. H. Cook, *Alcohol, Addiction and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). As to whether Augustine's own account of his struggle with his sexual habits in book VIII of the *Confessions* should be considered as a depiction of a sexual addiction, I hesitate to make such a characterization at the distance of some sixteen centuries of a remarkably vivid writer whose cultural and scientific understanding of these realities is different from our own.

Conclusion

This study has argued that an adequate response to the questions of experience generated by developments and controversies within the fields of moral theology and catechetics depends upon the recovery of the encounter with the Person of Christ as the source for these disciplines and for understanding the place of authentic Christian experience within them. Negatively, this encounter serves to reveal the distorted and sinful elements within human experience—both individual and social. Without the light of Christ, manifestations of evil often lay unrecognized in the morass of unreflective personal motivation, the impulse of habit, the blur of ordinary social interchange, or the shadows cast by structures of sin within a fallen world. Positively, this encounter serves to transform and enlarge the horizon in which this experience is understood and to provide a shared grammar in which the experience of healing and transformation can be expressed in the life of the Christian community.

These theological disciplines take part in this critical and constructive task that flow from this encounter at the heart of the Church's life. Moral theology serves both to identify actions, attitudes, and structures that are antithetical to the life of the Christian community and to help to discern individual and communal practices that foster and reinforce its participation in the life of grace. Additionally, it also serves to critically engage new questions that arise as a result of social, economic, or technological developments. Catechetics too has a critical function in reflecting on and discerning effective from ineffective catechetical methods. The ministry of catechesis itself serves to mediate the encounter with Christ that is at the source of the Church's life through the handing on of the Gospel.⁹⁴ Through reflection on Scripture, it also helps to provide the language and categories in which this transformative encounter can be understood, expressed, and refined.

The experience engaged in these fields of theological study and ministry is neither independent of the transforming encounter with Christ at the heart of the Church nor of the sources that mediate it—Scripture, tradition, and the liturgy. This experience rather is the fruit of this en-

⁹⁴ "Catechesis is nothing other than the process of transmitting the Gospel, as the Christian community has received it, understands it, celebrates it, lives it and communicates it in many ways" (*General Directory for Catechesis* §105).

counter and is given shape and expression by the shared grammar of revealed truth and through the praxis of the community. Reason certainly plays a vital role in the theological endeavor, but reason itself is in need of the healing work of grace in order to function rightly and the light of faith to grasp the full measure of truth. It may be the case that something like the four sources of Wesley's quadrilateral of authority can be understood to function within Catholic theology, but only if it is clear that they are not of equal weight.⁹⁵ In particular, to give experience pride of place is to risk distorting the reality of the condition of fallen humanity and the healing work of Christ's redemption.

As St. Augustine reminds us, the Church can thus be likened to a hospital where the Great Physician himself treats convalescent members with the medicine of the Gospel and the sacraments.⁹⁶ It is precisely this healing encounter with Christ that the Church seeks to offer in the great effort of our time—the New Evangelization.⁹⁷



⁹⁵ The weight given to these sources by Wesley himself as identified by contemporary scholars of Methodism (see note 74 above) seems congruent with the understanding argued here.

⁹⁶ One thinks here not only of Augustine's frequent use of this medicinal image noted above, but of the remarks of Pope Francis in his September 2013 interview, comparing the Church to a "field hospital" in which the wounded are treated. See the Zenit story "Pope Gives In-Depth Interview to Jesuit Journal," <http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/pope-gives-in-depth-interview-to-jesuit-journal>.

⁹⁷ Cf. Pope Francis: "The joy of the gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus. Those who accept his offer of salvation are set free from sin, sorrow, inner emptiness and loneliness. With Christ joy is constantly born anew. In this Exhortation I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come." *Evangelii Gaudium* §1.

