

Gathered for the Journey

Moral Theology in Catholic Perspective

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Jesus Christ, Scripture, and Ethics

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The books of the New Testament emerge out of an organic, grassroots process (a few centuries long) where an oral tradition of the apostolic faith comes to bear on what writings (letters and gospels) are integrated into Christian worship and teaching.¹ This grassroots process of canonization indicates that the authority of Scripture comes from within the life of worshipping communities. Before the New Testament was written, early Christians “identified God by narrating key events recorded in the [Old Testament] Scriptures, the creation of the world, the inspiration of the prophets, the coming of Christ in the flesh, his death and resurrection, the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.”² The New Testament attests to the conviction that Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the Jewish scriptures, and the Old Testament is understood to be authoritative precisely in this framework, that Christ can be seen as one with God from the beginning (John 1:1-18).

The experience of salvation in Jesus Christ and the proclamation of this salvation are the basis of biblical authority. Scriptural authority for Christians draws from the transforming power of new life that is experienced by Christians through Christ’s death and resurrection. In the moral life, therefore, biblical authority is not imposed from the outside, but comes from within the lives of people of faith. The commands in Scripture (e.g., “love your enemies,” in Matt. 5:44) show the contours of a way of life that calls for personal transformation and the “renewal” of our minds

1. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), pp. 603-6.

2. Robert Louis Wilken, “Interpreting the New Testament,” *Pro Ecclesia* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2005): 18.

(Rom. 12:2). Likewise, the biblical tradition is best expressed in the lives and practical reason of saintly people.³ Biblical authority comes not through the enforcement of commands, but from its fruitfulness as a medium of new life in Christ. The function of Scripture in the moral life is to open us to an encounter with God.

The meaning of our lives in light of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ is the focus of this chapter. The first section of the chapter explains that the New Testament develops within the process of proclaiming that Jesus has risen, and the following sections give account of Jesus' ministry, death, and resurrection. The last section of the chapter deals with a much-debated issue in moral theology: the relationship of Scripture and ethics. The main point of the final section is that Scripture has its life as we are enlivened by the Spirit of God. In the Bible we hear the call to follow: to respond to "God with us" in Jesus Christ and his Spirit. Scripture and morality are connected, not by certain methods of biblical interpretation or moral theory, but by the Spirit in our lives today. The primary role of Scripture in moral discernment is to open our lives to seeing and experiencing God's presence in the world, to understanding our identity as part of a community of faith, and to living our role as Christians in our time.

Scripture and the Church

The Bible itself is a very human book to the degree that it is full of imperfections and imperfect people (think of Abraham or Peter). An accusation often levied against Scripture is that it is all too human. It is too bound up with human history, not only in its composition over a thousand-year period, but also in the vicissitudes of its oral transmission, written formation, transcription, and translation — all subject to human hands and interests. Many Christians unwittingly support this accusation by claiming that every word of the Bible is the literal truth and that no interpretation is required. The Bible, they claim, is free from human involvement. In making these claims, especially that the Bible speaks for itself and needs no interpretation, they give a false idea about our role in Scripture and set up an easy target for skeptics. Even worse, such a claim encourages the idea that the exact

3. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Crossroad, 1988), pp. 245-53. According to Gadamer, authority is not an arbitrary exertion of will over against reason, but it is based in reasoning and mastery of reasoning. Here the saints or holy ones are those who gain mastery in the reasoning of faith.

words of the Bible themselves (even in their English translation) are God's Word rather than an instrument of the Word, of God's presence in Jesus Christ.

It should cause no crisis of faith to admit that the imprint of human life (with its imperfections) is clearly upon Scripture. Modern historical-critical methods have attempted to reconstruct the diverse sources from which the biblical writers and communities drew their understanding of Jesus, to trace how the words and actions of Jesus were passed on in oral and written form, to construct a picture of the cultural settings in which the writings emerged, and to clarify the specific social and theological concerns of biblical authors. When modern historical-critical methods are put to the task, we find, for instance, that the Gospel writers were themselves not eyewitnesses, that they drew on various sources about Jesus, that each arranged his sources according to his own rhetorical and evangelical plan, and that the actual words of Jesus, his actions, and the chronology of his actions cannot be disentangled from this process of the church's proclamation and reception. All these points are likely to be familiar, but if not, they can be found in reading guides and notes of *The Catholic Study Bible*.⁴

The modern methods of interpretation are affirmed in *Dei Verbum*, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* of Vatican Council II (1965).⁵ In the document, modern historical methods are set within the history of proclamation, worship, and discipleship, so that, in the words of Sandra Schneiders, "the real Jesus is not the earthly Jesus stripped of transhistorical dimensions and uninterpreted by faith informed by the paschal mystery. . . . [J]ust as there is no such thing as a human Jesus who is not divine or a divine Jesus who is not human, so there is no historical Jesus who is not the proclaimed Jesus or vice versa."⁶ Schneiders here puts the very human nature of the Bible in an "incarnational" framework: in Christ God takes human flesh, and faith in the incarnation shapes how we understand God's presence in the frailties of human life. As *Dei Verbum* explains, "the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as of old the Word of the eternal Father, when he took to Himself the weak flesh of humanity, became like other men."⁷

4. Donald Senior, ed., *The Catholic Study Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).

5. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, §12, in *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J. (New York: America Press, 1966), pp. 111-28.

6. Sandra M. Schneiders, I.H.M., *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1999), pp. 107-8.

7. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, §13.

Although the Bible is full of human flaws and frailties, these frailties become part of a larger story. The limitations of human history in passing on the word of God are the very medium through which the Word of God is made present to us. This is the meaning of the incarnation, and in this sense God is the author of Scripture through the vulnerability of human authorship. The very human, social, and historical processes from which the Scriptures emerge are the material, the earthly stuff, that conveys the reality of God's salvation for the world. In the context of faith in the incarnation, the *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation* makes a bold claim. "Since everything asserted by the inspired authors or sacred writers must be held to be asserted by the Holy Spirit, it follows that the books of Scripture must be acknowledged as teaching firmly, faithfully, and without error that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation."⁸ In this way the biblical word of salvation, precisely through the limitations of human words, reveals God's full self-communication to us in Jesus Christ. Our human *words* are the medium of the divine *message*. Essential to the message of salvation is that our frail humanity becomes part of the proclamation of the kingdom of God.

Salvation History

The claim that we encounter God in Scripture raises questions about how we conceive of God's relationship to the world. Too often we slip into an unsophisticated notion (often influenced by the natural sciences) that God's activity amounts to an intervention into the processes of a closed system of the world. I have been searching for a short quotation that would suggest an alternative and also avoid a long explanation. Here it is. When discussing the nature of human freedom in relationship to God, Herbert McCabe explains that our freedom does not compete with God, but depends upon God as its source. "The creative causal power of God does not operate on me from outside, as an alternative to me; it is the creative causal power of God that makes me *me*."⁹ If we insert "creation" in the place of "me," we might begin to understand God's relationship to the world. God's presence to the world makes creation *creation*. We often fall into the mistaken idea that God is like any cause or power in the world, only more powerful. McCabe suggests that we have to think about God's activity in the world as

8. *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (Dei Verbum)*, §11.

9. Herbert McCabe, *God Matters* (Springfield, Ill.: Templegate, 1991), p. 13.

different in kind, as different than we are inclined (as creatures) to think and not entirely graspable (as we cannot put our minds around the very source of all life itself).

The knowledge that God's activity is not entirely within our reach helps explain the biblical story as salvation history. Consider that we, represented by Adam and Eve in Paradise, are quick to listen to the serpent who tells us that we are in competition with God, that God is keeping divine knowledge from us (Gen. 3:5), and that we need only to grasp it surreptitiously and take possession of it on our own. In a real sense, our primordial sin is to grasp at God's creation itself to call it ours rather than God's. We want to make ourselves. We want to be our own lords. For Christians, the irony of this grasping is that we desire to grab for ourselves something that will be given to us as a gift, a sharing in God's nature.¹⁰ One outcome of continuing to reject the gift, and of failing even to see it as a gift, is to project upon the nature of God our view of how we would like gods to be (e.g., divine power should be on our country's side and against our enemies, or God should accept our personal lifestyles). We like to talk about the unconditional love of God, but are quick to love God according to our own conditions.

The biblical story of salvation sets out a course of events that most of us could not have imagined or developed in theory. At the decisive moment of victory and the inauguration of God's new day, the anointed one, the Lord, is executed by his antagonists with at least verbal approval of just about everyone (Mark 15:13-14). For Christians, the crucifixion and resurrection form the climax of a long covenant history, and we have learned to look back and see what we could not have seen before, that Jesus' life and death are consistent with the story of salvation from the beginning. One point has already been noted: the primordial sin, which we humans share, is to think that we are in competition with God, and a powerful aspect of God's answer to our sin is that Jesus refuses to play the rival. No army of angels is sent to stop his enemies (Matt. 4:6-7). He overcomes sin through what, in terms of worldly power, we are more likely to call losing than winning. In worldly terms, we like to name winners and losers, but in the cross there is reconciliation.

Another key aspect of salvation history is God's calling out and setting apart a people. This "setting apart" shapes Israel's identity and constitutes the context in which Jesus proclaims the coming kingdom of God,

10. Robert Barron, *The Strangest Way: Walking the Christian Path* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2002), p. 33.

gathers disciples and sends them out to the "lost sheep of Israel" (Matt. 10:1-15).¹¹ Jesus' healing power, his eating with sinners, and his good news to the poor are also connected to the gathering and restoration of Israel, as a sign that God's reign is at hand.¹² In our time, this special attention to gathering a "people of God" may appear to be exclusivist.¹³ One might ask, "Doesn't each individual have a relationship to God?" Yes, this is true; but the question misses the point. In the Bible, God's redemption for the world hinges on the "setting apart" of a people to share in God's holiness (Exod. 19:3-6; Lev. 19:1-3). And when this holiness shines, God's people will be like salt and light for the world (Matt. 5:16).

The people Jesus gathers are called to the task of living out God's offer of salvation.¹⁴ The logic of this task makes sense in view of Scripture as a whole. First, salvation is social (it is certainly personal, but not the possession of individuals per se). Second, grace is not coercive, but an offer of liberty. Essential to the freedom of redemption is freedom from self-centeredness — from the idea that life (not to mention salvation) is about me (or about me and God).¹⁵ God's love is for all creation; therefore a "gathered people" is needed — a people called as one in Christ. Sin is a deliberate rejection of God's will for us, and in salvation we are saved from our turning away from God.

Our reconciliation is becoming part of God's love for the world. Love, then, cannot be imposed. If we are forced to turn to God, then we will not be given the grace of being active in God's love. God's love will have to be embodied in the world as an offer. Indeed, the crucified and risen Lord enacts a strange but beautiful offer, and Christians accept the task (patterned after God's covenant with Israel) to embody the offer of the incarnate Son of God. This task sets the church up for constant failure. By voluntarily taking on the task of God's love, we make every slip into ungodly thinking and action all the more sinful.

It would make more sense (it may seem) for God to make a people perfect before offering a job requiring holiness. God could certainly improve the certification process and quality control before issuing a call. However, this seemingly sensible plan (to make people perfect for the job) would serve better to show our own inclinations of love rather than to communi-

11. Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984), pp. 9-12.

12. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, pp. 12-14.

13. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, p. 17.

14. Lohfink, *Jesus and Community*, pp. 17-20.

15. Barron, *The Strangest Way*, pp. 113-23.

cate and make present the self-giving that is God's love. We tend to love those who are already most like us, and I suspect that many of us (like me) prefer to be loved because of the goodness and nobility that we already possess. Few of us want to be pitied as a charity case. In contrast, God's love is an invitation of friendship through God's self-giving — giving us what we cannot achieve on our own, a share in God's own life. The continuing foundation of God's love and the life of the church is forgiveness. The biblical history of salvation is the story of our God who is just, steadfast, and faithful, and always calling us back with a continual offer of reconciliation.

The Good News of Easter

The previous section introduced the biblical story of salvation history. This section will continue on the topic of salvation by focusing on the liturgy of the Word during the Easter Vigil. Easter is the inauguration of the biblical proclamation "He is risen." The Easter Vigil begins during the night of Holy Saturday, when Jesus has descended to the dead, and looks forward to the dawn of Easter morning. It is central to the Christian moral life. It is the time of our baptism. Even if we were baptized on another day, the vigil is the theological context where our baptism is best understood. It sets our lives within God's salvation history. We die and rise with Christ.

The vigil remembers salvation history by incorporating several readings in the liturgy of the Word: the account of creation in Genesis 1; Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac (Gen. 22:1-18); Israel's passage through the Red Sea (Exod. 14:15-15:1); readings from the prophetic books of Isaiah, Baruch, and Ezekiel; the apostle Paul's call to die and rise with Christ (Rom. 6:3-11); and Matthew 28:1-10, where Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of James and Joseph witness the empty tomb and encounter the risen Jesus.¹⁶ The Easter Vigil encapsulates the Christian proclamation of salvation from biblical times until today.

Some of the connections between Easter and the moral life can be understood through the formative and expressive functions of language in our lives. "A language is a system of communication that grows up around a common life."¹⁷ It forms how we think about the world and expresses who

16. Matt. 28:1-10 is read during Year A of the liturgical calendar.

17. Paul J. Wadell, "What Do All Those Masses Do for Us? Reflections on the Christian Moral Life and the Eucharist," in *Living No Longer for Ourselves: Liturgy and Justice in the Nineties*, ed. Kathleen Hughes and Mark R. Francis (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991), p. 154.