

Studying Holy Lives(1): A Methodological Necessity for the Christian Ethicist?(2)

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While growth and development are standard features of any flourishing academic discipline, the transformation that the discipline of Catholic moral theology has undergone over the last several decades is extraordinary. Most Catholic ethicists would agree, however, that significant as this development is, the task laid upon the discipline by Vatican II's call for reform remains a work in progress. One particularly unsettled area of ongoing exploration appears in the endeavor to integrate Catholicism's natural law tradition and the theological and christological particularity implicit in the call for reform. How we achieve this integration has implications for how we understand the methodology of the discipline. The more that a Christian specificity is allowed to tutor or qualify the traditional natural law approach, the more important will it be for scholars to be learned in Christian theology, belief, and practices.

One component of this shift toward Christian particularity is a reconfiguration of the Christian moral life around themes of holiness and discipleship.(3) The Christian's calling as a follower of Christ shapes the kind of moral goodness that is to provide a norm for every Christian life, and, thus, that goodness cannot be properly understood through ethical reflection that simply brackets its Christian context or its eschatological endpoint. Since discipleship and the pursuit of holiness are integral to all Christian life, they are also integral concerns of ethics. Scholars who seek to address issues relating to Christian life would, correspondingly, need a deep understanding of ideas of Christian perfection and sanctity — that is, something more than book knowledge—in order to understand well the complex ways they bear on Christian moral existence. “Holiness” is part of the ethicist's required area of expertise.

I want to explore what competencies are now required of contemporary Catholic moral theologians in light of this focus on Christian discipleship and related developments in the circumstances of Catholic ethicists. My belief is that changes in the discipline of Catholic moral theology have increased the need for ethicists to be rooted in the Christian story and transformed by its message. My concern is that there may be insufficient support for such rootedness within the academic and ecclesial contexts that the moral theologian occupies. Achieving such a Christian vision is complicated in the academic culture in which Catholic ethicists practice their trade. That culture is given shape by a constellation of values whose form does not align well with that of the field of Christian ethics, especially insofar as it is concerned with questions of what constitutes the holy life. This misalignment, I will argue below, is due in part to the dominance of rationalistic and acutely critical modes of contemporary research, along with a lack of concern for the personal moral character of the one engaging in research. The adverse influence of the secular side of the academy is all the more problematic because there are insufficient forces within the discipline of Catholic moral theology to counterbalance these external pressures. More thought, therefore, needs to be given to how Catholic moral theologians can “form” themselves in the faith so as to be able to address issues of Christian discipleship and the holy life. One important way of doing so is through

scholarly reflection on the lives of the saints, which I call “saintly voyeurism.” I use this phrase not to advocate a professional disengagement from saintly ideals but only to call our attention to the fact that such disengagement often exists. We do not occupy the same moral space as the saints, hence the need to learn from them.

There are two overlapping contexts in which Catholic ethicists practice their trade. The first is the academy, with its particular expectations of scholarship and groundbreaking research. The second is the Christian community, which includes the institutional and cultural life of Catholicism and the theological commitments that give normative shape to the particular way ethicists of a Catholic stripe do their work. In recognized and unrecognized ways, these contexts inform ethicists’ understanding of the discipline and their responsibilities within it. I will examine the academic context first and then turn to the ecclesial context.

The Academic Context

We could begin by enumerating the various qualities that are characteristic of academic work; however, I want first to step back and begin with the broader context of American professional life. The culture of professionalism acts as a framework for much of white-collar work in this country, and it also shapes the academic disciplines. Since the turn of the century, the number of professionals in our country has risen dramatically⁽⁴⁾; but more important than sheer number is the influential role that the professional has come to have in our society *qua* professional (that is, as a member of a caste with special expertise). The position of importance that professions occupy in our society is, as the sociologist Talcott Parsons points out, “unique in history.”⁽⁵⁾ Furthermore, in subtle ways this cultural climate informs our vision of what constitutes “good” (i.e., virtuous, honorable, praiseworthy) work in whatever professional field we occupy and, correspondingly, what type of persons we need to be in order to do our work well. What is striking about the culture of professionalism for our discussion is that there is within it only a very selective concern about the personal qualities of the practitioner (i.e., personality, moral character, personal incentives, world views). That is, it focuses narrowly on those character traits that directly contribute to one’s ability to perform the professional task well. Indeed, part of the esteem for the professions is that they hold the professional to universal and objective standards that are not dependent on contentious or subjective judgments, such as those dealing with moral qualities, but instead center on skills and practices that the professional’s training allows him or her to perform successfully. To be a good lawyer, doctor, or English professor, for example, one need not be a comprehensively virtuous person; one need only attain those virtues — or better, skills — associated with one’s profession.

A kind of intensification of some aspects of the professional ideal occurs in its incarnation within university life. The university not only gave birth to modern professional life,⁽⁶⁾ but it is also the institution that continues to preserve the core characteristics associated with it: altruistic ideals, objective procedures, distinctive skills, and, most importantly, the cultivation of very specialized knowledge that grounds a distinction between professionals and lay people and justifies the former’s claim to authority in matters of their select expertise. Thus the values and standards that characterize much of professional life are particularly ingrained in the standards that shape the culture of university life. At the same time, however, the influential presence in American culture of a version of those same values, by way of the professional ethos, works to reinforce selectively their presence within university life. The professionalism of the wider culture returns back to the university an objectivity stripped of passion, a skillfulness reduced to efficiency, and a concern for truthfulness

equated with correction of errors. Such eclipsed values are not always consonant with the broader ideals of the university (e.g., a richly interpreted and energetically pursued quest for truth). This neo-professionalization has “rationalized” university life in the sense described by Richard Posner: It has become “businesslike, rule-bound, disenchanting.”(7)

Pressures from within the university’s own tradition and from without encourage a truncated, narrowly rationalistic understanding of how insight into the world is attained. One element of this truncation is the rather limited set of personal virtues and qualities of character that the university community considers necessary for the scholar. The dominant understanding of scholarly work holds, not without reason, the personal development of one’s moral and affective character as marginal to the scholarly enterprise. A “conversion” of an intellectual nature suffices. Each age, of course, views the pursuit of human knowledge differently. Classical thought linked increase in knowledge to the full development of the human person (i.e., to moral and spiritual growth). For the Middle Ages, *eruditio* was tied to *religio*; only through religion could scholars “fulfill their restless yearning to know.”(8) For the contemporary academic world, an increase in one’s understanding of the world still depends on the virtues of the individual scholar; that is, it is not merely a matter of some external “thing” one does, but is also about who one is. Those virtues, however, are no longer tied to traditional themes of morality. The particular virtues that dominate in the contemporary academic pursuit are instead bound up with the professional role of the academic as it is understood by the academic community. These select virtues of the scholarly life are not at all at odds with the discipline of Catholic ethics, but their dominance and the rather exclusive regard given to them are.

Two groups of virtues strike me as particularly important to scholarly work in the contemporary university. First are those virtues of the scholar commonly associated with a scientific-like rationalism, an “aping of the sciences” as Andrew Louth puts it: intelligence, clarity, objectivity (understood as critical distance from one’s object of study), and methodological doubt before all that is not clearly proven.(9) The second group, at times at odds with the first, is composed of those virtues reflecting the critical “edge” of contemporary scholarship. We can describe them in terms of three dynamics familiar to scholars: agorism, circumscription, and unmasking. By “agorism” I refer to the idea that the university in its best moments continues the spirit of the Greek “agora,” a place of conversation and public debate; but I also use the term more narrowly to refer to the type of adversarial debate that the academic community often judges as desirable in its task of understanding the world better. Deborah Tannen speaks of the “argument culture” of our society, which in the academic world expresses itself as a need “to position [one’s] work in opposition to someone else’s” and to “disprove others’ arguments in order to be original, make a contribution and demonstrate intellectual ability.”(10) “Circumscription” describes the inclination against comprehensive or universalist claims and comprehensive master narratives; it turns a postmodern disposition into a normative stance. Finally, “unmasking” points to what the academy often views as a virtuous suspicion: the belief that truth claims conceal subtle and pernicious advancements of self-interest (whether personal, group, social, or institutional) and unconscious desires of power. Nietzsche helped make us aware of the strategies and assertions of power hidden within moral discourse, and the approach has been continued in the influential work of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault. Underlying each of these dynamics is the scholar practicing her trade with attitudes and dispositions that are deemed virtuous in the contemporary academy.

While my focus is on the virtues (i.e., inclinations and dispositions) of the scholar and not on the positions taken by them, it is also the case that these same virtuous dispositions incline the scholar

toward particular substantive positions. For example, a rationalistic approach to ethics flows easily from a narrowly rationalist approach to scholarship. Peter Singer's utilitarianism, Alan Gewirth's "Principle of Generic Consistency," and John Rawls' neo-Kantianism presume not only that the moral life is a fundamentally rational enterprise, but also that the endeavor to understand it is similarly rational. A commitment to methodological rationalism yields its desired fruit: a successful rationalistic ethics. The theoretical result justifies the scholarly virtue.

The issue here is not merely that of whether rightly ordered desires and affections are necessary for reason to achieve sound moral judgments about concrete problems. There is a more fundamental moral question that requires a rightly ordered moral sense and affection: What is the nature of ethics itself? No theory of ethics is simply a deductive, rational pursuit, since in its justifications every theory appeals, explicitly or implicitly, to our already existing ideas and intuitions⁽¹¹⁾ about the moral life and about which ethical theory provides the "best account" of raw moral data (i.e., of the often inconsistent and chaotic manner in which moral claims are experienced by ordinary people). The issue here is not whether intuitionism as an ethical system is valid or not. My point is, rather, that the ethical system that we find most persuasive will depend in part on whether the "answers" it generates on various moral issues fit well with our gut-level, moral intuitions about those issues. Once we are "in" an ethical system, its arguments will have their appeal to us, but first we have to accept that system, and doing so requires that it at least loosely fit with our pre-existing moral views.⁽¹²⁾ Thus, if our moral outlook and character have not been properly developed and are flawed, our choices about the nature of ethics might be similarly flawed. The soundness of our reasoning cannot always overcome bad starting points.

In regard to the critical inclination of scholarship described above, one could argue that in no other place in the academy does its soundness prove itself better than in the field of ethics. Critical doubt cast on past moral judgments, a belief that cultural and historical prejudices shape purported universal moral claims, and a suspicion of the ways conventional values hide attempts at control and power by the dominant group have been important to the valid insights of a wide array of contemporary thinkers, including, for example, most postmodern philosophers, liberation theologians, and feminist theorists. While the field of ethics offers ample evidence of the value of these scholarly emphases, however, it is also uniquely able to indicate the limits of them. Relentlessly pursued, the biases driving the critical moment of scholarly work lead to nihilism, or, as Richard Rorty puts it, to a sense that

there is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions.⁽¹³⁾

Such a position goes against widely shared and valid moral intuitions (e.g., the belief that at least some moral requirements are not merely matters of social construction) and is decidedly at odds with traditional Catholic views. For Catholic ethicists at least, some traditional and conventional insights into what is moral and praiseworthy (e.g., respect for innocent life) have shown themselves to have enduring power, even in the face of the critical blows of Nietzschean unmasking and postmodern deconstruction.

These critique-oriented inclinations and rationalistic virtues (e.g., honesty, intelligence, and methodological doubt) do play a positive role in the aim of scholarly research, but they are not sufficient determinants of the character of the scholar — at least not for those sympathetic to the Aristotelian tradition (including Catholic ethicists). The Aristotelian tradition requires of the moral authority something more than intellectual competency, that is, that he or she has undergone personal, moral transformations that have in turn engendered virtues like prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. This approach to ethics requires conversion, not only performatively (doing the good) and epistemically (knowing the good), but also affectively (loving the good).

One way of getting at this need for something more than intellectual competency in ethics scholarship is to consider the role of our desires and affect. The Catholic tradition has long held that truly human desires⁽¹⁴⁾ serve as appropriate guides for human action. Likewise, in the virtue-grounded, teleological approach of Aristotle, desires are not just distracting forces, “mere automatic pushes towards the world that can be directed only by brute suppression,” as Martha Nussbaum writes. They are “responsive intentional elements, capable of flexible ethical development.”⁽¹⁵⁾ Desires are also key for our moral perception. They light up our moral landscape, helping to indicate worthwhile goals for intentional activity. To use the teleological language of Aristotle and Thomas, desires help incline us to our end, toward what is in keeping with a full human life. Our ends are not just intellectual ones; they have to do with what brings us emotional well-being, psychological peace, and deep satisfaction about a life well lived. If our affect is misdirected, so will our action be. The wrong goals are lit up, if you will, and thus deliberations about what is to be done will be similarly distorted.

Our desires and affections, when properly functioning, are not simply the docile sycophants of reason and intellect. Correlatively, we cannot make sound moral judgments and proper evaluations of circumstances merely through the process of academic research. Our desires, however, are just one level of our intentional response to the world in need of transformation. There is another, more comprehensive level: that of our moral perception and the values that form it. Our values reflect particular moral judgments we make about our world and the events, actions, people, and things within it. They shape our moral “vision” of the world, that is, how we perceive it morally. The moral space in which we make moral judgments is pervaded by and colored with moral values,⁽¹⁶⁾ and we cannot do without such valuations and still “know” the world.⁽¹⁷⁾ These moral values are not the results of conscious choice or scholarly discovery, nor are they simply the work of either our desires and affection or our intellect, but rather a complex interaction of both. The point for our discussion here is that values and moral goods are not qualities that we uncover only after we understand the world through other (rationalistic, critical) means. Moral insight is not a matter of deducing the moral implications of some factual or rationalistic understanding of the world, or even of simply critiquing conventional views. It is “seeing a complex, concrete reality in a highly lucid and richly responsive way; it is taking in what is there, with imagination and feeling.”⁽¹⁸⁾ If we have painted the moral picture incorrectly, we cannot expect reason and critical work to come along and correct our errors. Our failure here is not simply one of critical reason but of vision. Thus any ethicist wishing to avoid such limitation must not only undertake conventional scholarly research but undergo also a change of heart, that is, a new moral perspective that touches the levels of affect and imagination. Something like a conversion to a different way of seeing the world would seem to be necessary before one can claim good moral judgment.

The virtues of reason and critical thought are not enough to guarantee sound development of moral knowledge. Scholarly work in ethics must include the difficult, and deeply free, choice on the scholar's part to be a different person and thus enter a different moral world because he or she now interprets the world differently. There is a "moral achievement" in the way we perceive the world.⁽¹⁹⁾ Only with this achievement, through a conversion of heart that changes the way we approach our reality, can we do ethics well. Professional training and intellectual rigor alone cannot produce such a moral perspective, but little in the discipline directs the ethicist toward the moral achievement of looking at the world anew.

The Ecclesial Context

Much of this is not news to most ethicists; the only question might be why someone would see it as a particular concern of our generation. The issues are perennial. Aristotle believed that only those experienced in a life of virtue knew what it meant to be virtuous, and thus only they were able to teach others.⁽²⁰⁾ Ethicists sympathetic to the Aristotelian tradition (including many Catholic moralists) believe, with some reason, that they can mitigate this problem through a type of vicarious virtue. That is, by attending to the acknowledged moral authorities of the past and present, ethicists can supplement the limitations of their own moral outlook. We will return to this below. In addition, I suspect that most ethicists can rightly hope that they have achieved in their lives a kind of basic goodness and thus can claim virtuous competency; they are, to borrow a phrase from papal documents, "men and women of good will." There are good reasons, however, to believe that the "misalignment problem" — the gap between the requirements of the scholarly life and those of moral reasoning — has increased over the last several decades. I have already addressed one problem contributing to this misalignment: The values and priorities of professional academia allow no methodological place for an interest in, and encouragement of, the moral character of ethicists themselves, which, at least for the approach to ethics advocated above, represents a significant weakness.⁽²¹⁾ In addition to academic pressures, however, three significant shifts in the institutional, ecclesial context in which Catholic moral theologians do ethics have affected the way they perform their task and have compounded the misalignment problem.

The first change is the shift away from the legalism associated with the confessional-driven ethics of the pre-conciliar period to personalist approaches that incorporate themes of Christian discipleship and spiritual growth. During the last several decades, much work has been done by Catholic scholars to recover the theological/christological horizon of moral theology. This recovery is evident in a diverse array of projects: the renewal in studies of Scripture and its use for ethics; the work that has been done to restore the theological component of Thomas Aquinas' ethics; an increased awareness of the ways in which liturgical practices and reflection on Scripture tutor our desires; and the recovery of the doxological dimension of Christian discipleship.⁽²²⁾ Collectively, these projects indicate a shift in Catholic understanding of moral theology from a legalistic and rationalistic science to a discipline much more centered on the meaning and implications of Christ's call to the Christian. Because the discipline now concerns itself with the full implications of that call, and not only with what is within the legal bounds of "natural" ethics, Catholic moralists can no longer exclude considerations of what has traditionally been placed under the rubric of the holy life or Christian perfection.

The moral theology of the pre-conciliar era did not see "holiness of life" as part of its proper domain. The seminary textbooks at the time were clear: Ethics was concerned with "natural" ethics,

while the life of perfection belonged to the domain of ascetical or mystical theology.(23) Even virtue, a requirement for growth into Christian perfection and a central piece of Aquinas' ethical theory, was not a topic of great interest among moralists.(24) The call of Vatican II and the expansion of ethics beyond the confessional has transformed the discipline, and thus Richard McCormick, in describing how contemporary moral theology is distinctive from its earlier forms, could rightly speak of this present period of moral theology as an "age of holiness and witness."(25)

In spite, however, of the large amount of work done in recovering the theological and christological dimensions of the Christian moral life, more scholarly reflection is needed in regard to the role and function the themes of holiness and saintly existence should have in Catholic moral thought. We can leave open the question of whether or to what degree that saintliness is normative for all Christians (or rather simply represents an ideal toward which all should strive), but it is no longer permissible for Catholic moral thought in this post-Vatican II era to keep it quarantined, separated from ethical reflection. As Norbert Rigali observed a generation ago, "if all Christians are called to perfection, moral theology as a science of the Christian life will have to turn itself explicitly into a science of the life of striving for perfection. It will have to say explicitly what perfection and a life of such striving are."(26) Theorizing about such a life, however, is not the work of scholarly reason alone. While I do not believe we have to go so far as to say that one has to be holy to know holiness, some other skills and virtues besides those necessary for Ph.D. credentials are required of the Catholic moralist because of this new concern with holiness.

The second change compounds the problem of the first. What is required now more than ever are spiritual practices that nurture the ethicist's Christian vision; however, there is a marked diminishment within Catholicism of institutionalized forms of such practices. Some of these spiritual practices were widely available to the Catholic population in general (e.g., devotional readings, daily Eucharist, benedictions, first Fridays, regular feast days, Lenten fasting, and rosary recitations). Other practices were part of Catholic ethicists' lives because they themselves were often priests and even seminary professors educating seminarians for a life of pastoral ministry. In principle, these clerical ethicists participated in the liturgy of the hours, attended regular Eucharist, had annual retreats, were deeply rooted in a particular intellectual tradition, and shared in spiritual conversation. Their context offered them an interpretative horizon in which they were invited to understand themselves as called to a special and higher holiness. The life of the Church was their life; its documents, politics, and leaders shaped their hearts and intellects. While such institutionalized practices did not guarantee conversion and a life of holiness, they did offer important support for them.

Recent discussion has drawn attention to the importance of such moral formation. Much of the work relating liturgy and ethics, for example, has focused on the ways in which liturgy forms and shapes our affection. Similarly, recent studies in the ancient idea of *askesis* — exercises that were at once intellectual, moral, and spiritual — have reminded us of the ways in which classical, philosophical reflections on ethical matters were meant to be practices that shaped and transformed the individual. These practices were not strictly "ascetic," as we think of it, but were often more like critical reflections on life and the world as a means of self-cultivation and self-formation.(27) Ascetical practices developed in conjunction with these philosophical reflections to support the "development of particular virtues" and "strategies for the avoidance of vice."(28) This tradition challenges us today with its suggestion that moral wisdom involves more than learning principles, rules, and general theory and that apart from explicitly formative practices, we are in danger of being

unduly influenced by, if not transformed in accord with, whatever (counter-) formative behaviors are encouraged by our consumerist culture. Growth in new spiritual practices within Catholicism, such as Bible studies and social activism, have not filled the *askesis* void left by the decline of pre-Vatican II devotions; and the lack of adequate formative practices promises to become more pressing because of the growing institutional marginalization of the younger generation of Catholics, (and, one can presuppose, of some who will eventually become moral theologians).⁽²⁹⁾

The third change relates to the kind of applied issues that the magisterium and Catholic ethicists address. The almost complete abandonment of scholarly reflection on specific, often personal, case studies paralleled (and was justified by) the change in the confessional needs of the Church and a movement away from the confessional emphasis of pre-conciliar ethics. Issues of public policy, though always a concern of Catholic ethics, now occupy much of Catholic reflection on applied issues. A danger, however, accompanies this shift: It could skew the way Catholic moralists understand their profession and the role that a standard of holiness plays in it. Ethicists are affected by the issues on which they reflect. They tutor ethicists into certain ways of understanding problems. Public policy issues, because they require widespread consensus in a pluralistic society, are often poor vehicles for exploring the radical implications of the call to discipleship for the individual Christian life. The practice of casuistry, with its focus on the ordinary dilemmas of everyday life, was done not only as a way of solving those dilemmas, but also as a way of training the moral wisdom of the confessor — a kind of *askesis* for him.⁽³⁰⁾ Such *askesis* is needed today more than ever. Contemporary casuist reflections on daily life issues, with the expressed intention of exploring the implications of Christian discipleship, might serve to educate today's ethicist in a kind of moral reasoning appropriate to a discipline that concerns itself with matters of Christian holiness. Moreover, such reflections are part of the ecclesial responsibilities of Catholic ethicists; the Church needs help in thinking through what it means to live holy lives, and it will not happen exclusively through studies of immigration, just war, or welfare reform, however clear and pressing the need for reflection on such issues is.

Consider, for example, the following case:

John, a public hack driver, declares, in confessing sins, that he is in the habit of driving people to brothels. This he does at times on their simple request. At other times, in response to their demand if he knows of such places, he replies affirmatively, and drives them there. John argues that since such resorts are allowed to exist, it is not unlawful to drive his patrons to them, nor wrong to inform them of their existence and location; otherwise his business and income will suffer gravely, as others are prepared to do this work.⁽³¹⁾

The case appeared in a 1925 article. It is one of those bewildering and complex cases that moralist-confessors struggled with in an earlier generation. Such case studies no longer receive attention from ethicists (for reasons that have their merit: The cases were analyzed in rational, legalistic terms with an eye to the confessional). I would like to suggest, however, that such cases can still be fruitfully explored, not with the aim of Yes or No determinations, but in light of present concerns with the Christian vocation (e.g., those concerning personalistic values, personal integrity, witness to gospel ideals, personal vocation, etc.). For all the legalism and preoccupation with sin of pre-Vatican II ethics, it tacitly recognized that in the small affairs of human existence a grand drama of goodness and evil was being played out. Ordinary existence is where our dialogue with God takes place, and,

thus, ordinary existence must be a concern for Catholic moralists. Theoretical reflections on how quotidian acts can be lived as moments of discipleship should become part of the discipline of Christian ethics.

Saintly Voyeurism

One might think that with all my emphasis on the importance of saintliness for the vision of the ethicist that the straightforward solution would be simply to proclaim saints as the new moral authorities for our generation. Saintliness, however, is not a sufficient requisite for moral thought. The experience and wisdom of the saints do not provide norms that translate simply to the lives of other people; their experiences need further “disciplined reflection” as to how they might make normative claims on us.⁽³²⁾ In addition, their moral views, while on the surface edifying, become simplistic and unhelpful if propped up and made into universal norms. Most presumably would agree that Mother Teresa of Calcutta was a saint, but her saintliness does not guarantee that all her experiences should be paradigms for others or that her reflections be made normative. Her suggestion, for example, that the elderly are in nursing homes because of the insufficient love of children fails if we were to view it as an adequate and complete explanation of the actual situation of nursing home patients and their families in general.⁽³³⁾ Saintliness by itself does not guarantee moral wisdom.

Hence, the discipline faces a challenge, a perennial issue that has become more acute in this recent generation: There exist two forms of moral authority, that of the saint and that of the scholar, neither of which is by itself sufficient as a source of moral wisdom. The Church of an earlier generation had an institutional location in which it tried to integrate these two moral authorities, even if not always successfully: the seminary professor, a scholar whose semi-monastic existence was attuned to the liturgical rhythms of the Church and whose daily life exposed him to the symbols, images, and language of Christian discipleship.

A more promising antidote to the problems raised by post-conciliar changes than simply transferring moral authority to the saint can be found in a new type of casuistry, one we might call “discipleship casuistry”: ethical reflection on the ordinary acts of a holy existence in order to better understand the demands of Christian discipleship. Such a casuistry can be a supplement to existing scholarly work in ethics, not a replacement. Discipleship casuistry would analyze not only isolated cases, but any situation or moral issue as it has been engaged by a saint. It would perform such explorations with an eye to discerning which actions are most consonant with a saintly life. These studies would also help in exploring the very meaning of saintliness itself, a particularly important topic for a Church that has given new emphasis to the fact that all Catholics — religious, ordained, and lay — are called to holiness.

On first glance, such a practice might not appear promising. After all, the kind of mundane, ordinary cases that are the topic of casuist reflections are not likely to be experienced by many individuals, because they are so situationally specified and concrete. Little can be gained by reflecting on them except for the few who might face such situations. Relatedly, to the degree that these cases are not concerns of public policy or are primarily personal matters, they seem to lie within that provenance of actions governed by what was called “counsels of perfection,” free possibilities for Christian discipleship and not strict requirements of morality. One of the insights offered by the casuist tradition, however, is that individual cases can help us develop our practical wisdom in a general

way, so that it becomes attuned to the goods and values of the Christian story, even if we never experience these particular cases ourselves. Thus, against the concern that these cases are often “private” issues, we can note that even for those moral responses that are not strictly demanded of the Christian, we can gain some clarity and insight into how such responses do embody important Christian values or sacrifice others.

Any moral reflection on the various kinds of decisions and concrete actions that make up a life of holiness is a kind of discipleship casuistry, but here I want to explore one possible form of it: reflection on the lives of the saints. Richard McCormick is right in suggesting that the meaning of Christian discipleship “is best gathered from the lives of the saints.”⁽³⁴⁾ Elizabeth of Hungary’s disobedience of her husband’s wishes in order to serve the poor, Elizabeth Ann Seton’s engagement with religious antagonism of her time, and Ignatius of Loyola’s apostolic choice to minister not only to the poor but to the powerful represent choices that raise interesting ethical issues for those wishing to better understand the saintly life. My suggestion here is not, however, that reflecting on saintly choices can help us determine right choices for our time and situation. Rather, reflecting on saintly vignettes and stories can do what the casuistry of a previous period did: train our moral senses. Saintly vision cannot be presumed of the scholar, but a fruitful substitutionary measure can be found in the practice of watching the saints from a distance, that is, from our place of lukewarm virtuosity, a “saintly voyeurism,” if you will. The practice of studying the saints — historical, contemporary, and even fictional⁽³⁵⁾ — in order to better understand Christian existence could act as a type of Catholic *askesis* that tutors our moral vision. The object of these reflections could take any number of forms: the specific acts of canonized saints, the regular choices of a group of saints, a comparison and contrast on the different choices made by popularly recognized holy men and women in regard to a specific issue, and so forth. The reflection on saintly existence is key; the goal is not answers to ethical dilemmas but new insight into the nature of the life of discipleship. Casuist reflection on saintly vignettes and critical examination of the moral goods and life possibilities portrayed in saintly existence will not necessarily produce saintly character in its practitioners, but we can hope that such reflection will attune them to Christian goods and values and transform their way of understanding the world so that their worldview better aligns with that of God’s kingdom. This formation of outlook can happen in five ways.

First, the saint confirms for the ethicist the ongoing viability of the Christian vision and the values it holds central, and thus can in turn strengthen ethicists’ own commitment to them and their resolve in holding the Christian community accountable to them. Lawrence Cunningham describes a saint as a person “grasped by a religious vision” in such a way as to lead “others to glimpse the value of that vision.”⁽³⁶⁾ Thus the saint offers an “eloquent testimony to the enduring value of certain Christian images or ideals.”⁽³⁷⁾ Some ideals of Christian discipleship are viewed, by Christians and non-Christians alike, as naive and impractical. The saint, however, counters these charges by living a life guided by such ideals and values, sometimes at great personal cost, and thus concretely witnesses to the possibility of embracing God’s kingdom in the here and now. In a jaded and weary world, one that has “grown unaccustomed to the expectation of holiness,” the saints “constitute a kind of moral miracle.”⁽³⁸⁾ Even the fictional saint, convincingly portrayed by the skillful artist, moves Christian ideals (and concerns over their plausibility) out of the realm of the abstract and into the realm of the “real” and the concrete. In so doing, these literary figures offer credible examples of possible embodiments of Christian sanctity. This strengthening of Christian commitment effected by the saint also occurs by way of counter-witness: Against the utilitarian-calculus reasoning that dominates social policy discussion of issues such as welfare, immigration, and capital punishment, the saint

witnesses to extravagant and, by some standards, wasteful, devotion to core Christian values (e.g., the sacredness of life, the possibility of conversion and redemption, the hope for reconciliation).(39)

Second, the saint underscores the theological dimension of the Christian life.(40) Christianity offers not only a “vision” of the world but a relationship with that which transcends it. The saints highlight aspects of that relationship that are critical for understanding the Christian moral life: surrender, obedience, participation in the paschal mystery, hope that transcends our finite condition, trust in the abiding power of love. Reflecting on the saint can help us “situate [our] moral reasoning in a decidedly theological sphere of inquiry, in a world of God’s inexhaustible mystery, where human life ... is invited into God’s boundless goodness.”(41) This theological context of moral theology cannot be reduced to a set of values that are then simply added into the Christian value mix (i.e., along with forgiveness, love of neighbor, simplicity of life, etc.). As pointers to the divine mystery, theological markers like surrender, obedience, and hope in the divine enter moral analysis as permanent destabilizers of human moral analysis.

Third, saints create new paradigms for how the Christian vision can be lived out in changing historical situations. They are “initiators and the creative models of the holiness which happens to be right for, and is the task of, their particular age.”(42) What Christian peacefulness meant in St. Francis’ time is not the same as what it means for us today. Aesthetics can offer an instructive parallel here. The capacity of quality art to elicit a positive response in the beholder endures across time, and yet each age produces forms of art that are particularly appropriate to that time period. Recognizing this symmetry between aesthetics and ethics, Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch, and in a different way, Hans Urs von Balthasar, have argued that living the moral life is analogous to the making of good art. The saints are the irruption of a lived moral artwork previously unseen and unfathomed; but once this lived moral artwork is seen and understood, it is recognized as a form of discipleship that is right for this time period. These moral art forms give us deep sensitivity to the ways in which values and goods can be furthered within the particularities of one’s own cultural and historical situation.

Fourth, the narrative of the saintly life provides a context for examining how holiness appears in the finitude and even brokenness of creaturely existence. The recent work done in narrative ethics has made us aware of the limitations of examining concrete acts apart from their narrative context. The moral qualities of concrete acts always take shape within the “sedimented” meaning provided by a life narrative. In addition, the in-depth scrutiny of human lives, made possible by the instruments of psychology and mass communication, has helped us recognize that even apart from the effect of sin, human life is always marked by the limitations of creaturely existence and the structural conditions of its social circumstance. When sanctity manifests itself, it does so within such conditioned, historical lives. Examining the concrete particulars of saintly lives can school the ethicist in the possibilities of discipleship within the limited and sometimes even broken forms of human existence.

Finally, the saints address us and challenge us to respond. The insights that the saints offer do not come to us like bits of information, something intellectually informative but otherwise indifferent to us. Their lives have an existential appeal. Indeed, to effect such an appeal is one aim of hagiography. As Edith Wyschogrod puts it, the lives of the saints are recounted in such a way that “the reader or hearer can experience their imperative power.”(43)

We can understand the source of this imperative power in several different ways. First, the stories of saintly lives present to us living options, that is, possibilities for our own lives. Good stories give satisfaction to us because they offer, as Nussbaum suggests, “patterns of possibility” which “turn up in human lives with such a persistence that they must be regarded as *our* possibilities.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ This kind of existential satisfaction increases in the case of a story that resonates deeply with the religious commitments of the Christian. Because these stories present us with attractive options for our own lives, they stir in us a response that is at least affective and imaginative (i.e., as we come to imagine adapting these stories to fit our lives), if not behavioral.

Second, we can appeal to the classical Greek notion of *kalokagathia* (the convergence of the beautiful and the good, *kalon* and *agathon*): What is good is attractive to behold as it is valuable to embody. Murdoch and Balthasar have offered contemporary versions of this idea. Both underscore that what we perceive morally awakens in us a spontaneous response: love of the transcendent good as it radiates in the world. The moral life is not a matter of simply choosing by force of will what is rationally discovered as good, but it is rather first perceiving one’s moral horizon well (i.e., truly, accurately, faithfully, honestly) — an act that is not just intellectual, but also a matter of the heart and affect — and then allowing oneself to be moved (affectively and behaviorally) in accord with that perception. The narratives of the saints then focus the light of the good in the world and magnify its capacity to elicit our loving response to it.

Finally, we can develop the above aesthetic approach christologically and suggest that the lives of the saints are sacramental signs, offering us something like divine grace made visible. John Cardinal Newman wrote that

in the life of the Saint, we have a microcosm, or whole work of God.... The exhibition of a person, his thoughts, his words, his acts, his trials, his fortunes, his beginnings, his growth, his end, have a charm to every one, and when he is a Saint they have a Divine influence and persuasion, a power of exercising and eliciting the latent elements of Divine grace in individual readers, as no other reading can claim.⁽⁴⁵⁾

Contemporary sacramental theology and studies on symbols emphasize that sacramental grace does not operate independently of human consciousness and intentionality, without a visible object that manifests to human perception the divine presence at work in us. In the context of liturgical prayer, creaturely elements become symbols of the Christian story. Similarly, the saint’s life manifests the divine labor of Christ and the presence of God in history and thus acts as a sacramental sign for the believing community.

These three approaches to understanding how the lives of saints can address us are not mutually exclusive, but each indicates a way in which the lives of the saints do more than instruct human reason. They appeal to the hearts and commitments of believers — including, one hopes, ethicists — and draw forth a new response, acting as catalysts for their own conversion and transformation.

Conclusion

Christian moral theology is not simply a deductive or rationalistic science. It requires that its practitioner have a well-formed heart that is attuned to the gospel and the values at its core. In an

ideal world, Catholic moral theologians would be saints and scholars; however, Catholic ethicists now perform their trade in a context that often does not sustain the kind of gospel vision associated with a saintly existence. The indifference of the academy toward traditional virtues, and the loss of pre-conciliar spiritual practices within Catholicism, leave Catholic moralists more susceptible than moralists of an earlier generation to an almost exclusively secular and narrowly rationalistic formation. I have argued that Catholic moral theology could benefit from a “discipleship casuistry” in which ethicists reflect on the ordinary practices and moral choices that reflect a deep commitment to the Gospels and a life of holiness. One such form of a discipleship casuistry can be found in a scholarly exploration of the lives of the saints. I do not suggest that such an examination would be uniquely formative. Scriptural meditation, prayer, devotional practices, and liturgical participation are just some of the practices that form the Christian into a disciple, but examining the lives of the saints, ordinary people achieving great moral character, is one practice that also allows ethicists to practice their art — that is, scholarly reflection on human action — and thus represents a distinctive resource for moralists. •

Notes

1. I am grateful to William Mattison, William Werpehowski, Cathy Kaveny, and an anonymous reviewer for their helpful comments and suggestions.
2. I will use the terms Catholic ethicist, Catholic moralist, and moral theologian interchangeably in this paper.
3. James Keating provides a very helpful list of the literature in this area in his “A Mystical Moral Theology,” *New Blackfriars* 83 (January 2002): 276 nn. 1-4.
4. The “number of people categorized as ‘professionals’ by census bureaus throughout the developed world has been growing in a dramatic fashion. In the United States before World War II, for example, only one percent of all employed people were college-educated and classified by the Census Bureau as ‘professional, technical, and kindred’ workers. Today, the comparable group is twelve times as large.” Steven Brint, *In an Age of Experts: The Changing Role of Professionals in Politics and Public Life* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 3.
5. Talcott Parsons, *Essays in Sociological Theory*, rev. ed. (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1954), 34.
6. See Burton J. Bledstein, *The Culture of Professionalism: The Middle Class and the Development of Higher Education in America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1976).
7. Richard Posner, “The University as Business,” *The Atlantic Monthly* 289 (June 2002): 21. Laurence Veysey finds three competing visions of higher education present in academia: career training, basic research, and liberal education. The pressures and needs of American business and society (i.e., the external culture) have put the last on the defensive, though it is also the one most innately resistant to a merely utilitarian and functional understanding of knowledge. “Higher Education as Profession: Changes and Continuities,” in *The Professions in American History*, ed. Nathan O. Hatch (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 15-32.

8. Michael J. Baxter and Frederick C. Bauerschmidt, "Catholics in the Academy," *Communio* 22 (Summer 1995): 288.
9. Andrew Louth, *Discerning the Mystery: An Essay on the Nature of Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 145, cited in James Keating and David M. McCarthy, "Moral Theology with the Saints," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 2 (April 2003): 208.
10. Deborah Tannen, "For Argument's Sake: Why Do We Feel Compelled to Fight About Everything?" *The Washington Post* (March 15, 1998): C1, C4; reprint available at www.georgetown.edu/faculty/tannend/argsake.htm, where Tannen notes that the article is adapted from her book, *The Argument Culture: Moving from Debate to Dialogue* (New York: Ballantine, 1999).
11. I am using "intuition" here not to refer to some innate human sense of basic moral goods, but to those background values and moral beliefs that are shaped by a combination of unreflected experience, cultural conditioning, and explicit moral reflection. These values and beliefs often form an unacknowledged lens through which agents perceive their moral world.
12. The rationalist, utilitarian Henry Sidgwick recognized this fact to his dismay over a century ago. In trying to decide which among the various forms of ethics — e.g., intuitional ethics, egoism, utilitarianism — was most reasonable, he saw, "in spite of [his] early aversion to Intuitional Ethics," that he had to make "a fundamental ethical intuition," and that without such an intuition, utilitarianism could not "be made coherent and harmonious." Henry Sidgwick, *The Methods of Ethics*, 7th ed. (1874; Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Co., 1981), xviii.
13. Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism: Essays: 1972-1980* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), xlii.
14. Depending on which spiritual/theological school one follows, "true" may be distinguished from "false" by the fact that the desires are either deep, properly formed, or through grace re-formed.
15. Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 307.
16. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Allen Lane/Penguin, 1993), 25.
17. "Value goes right down to the bottom of the cognitive situation" (*ibid.*, 384).
18. Martha C. Nussbaum, "Finely Aware and Richly Responsible?: Literature and the Moral Imagination," in *Anti-Theory in Ethics and Moral Conservatism*, ed. Stanley G. Clarke and Evan Simpson (New York: State University of New York Press, 1989), 116.
19. *Ibid.*, 115.
20. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, VI, 11, 1143b11-14. For a helpful resource in Aristotle's ethics, see the collection of essays edited by Amelie Oksenberg Rorty, *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1980).

21. In keeping with the academic view of the professional ethicist, a relatively recent *New York Times Magazine* article identified Daniel Callahan of The Hastings Center simply as “The Ethicist”; nothing else about his personal identity was necessary. Stephen L. Carter, “The Next Rush to a Lethal Judgment,” *The New York Times Magazine* (July 21, 1996): 24.

22. In regard to the use of Scripture in ethics, most Catholic works of late have tried to incorporate Scripture scholarship into their arguments. See, for example, Lisa Sowle Cahill’s *Love Your Enemies: Discipleship, Pacifism, and Just War Theory* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994). Discussions on recent interpretations of Thomas Aquinas can be found in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002). William Spohn explores the relationship between the emotions and morality in his “Passions and Principles,” *Theological Studies* 52 (March 1991): 69-87. For an important collection of essays addressing the relationship between liturgy and ethics, see the volume edited by E. Byron Anderson and Bruce T. Morrill, *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1998). The doxological nature of Christian discipleship is developed in Frans Josef Van Beeck’s *God Encountered: A Contemporary Catholic Systematic Theology* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989).

23. “Ascetic Theology formulates rules for the more certain realization of Christian perfection. Mystical Theology enunciates the method of the ascent of the mind and will to God.... Since these two parts of Theology deal with perfection, it would seem better that they should not be formally included in any treatment of Moral Theology as such.” Henry Davis, *Moral and Pastoral Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943), 2.

24. Charles E. Curran, *The Origins of Moral Theology in the United States: Three Different Approaches* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 1997), 300.

25. Richard McCormick, “Moral Theology 1940-1989: An Overview,” re-published in *Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 11, *The Historical Development of Fundamental Moral Theology in the United States*, ed. Charles E. Curran and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 66.

26. Norbert Rigali, S.J., “Christian Ethics and Perfection,” *Chicago Studies* 14 (1975): 238.

27. Maria Antonaccio notes that Pierre Hadot, whose important work *Philosophy as a Way of Life* has generated renewed interest in *askesis*, shows how “the term *askesis* was originally used by ancient philosophers exclusively to designate philosophical thought-exercises, ‘inner activities of the thought and will’ intended to cultivate certain habits of mind conducive to a life of wisdom.” “Contemporary Forms of *Askesis* and the Return of Spiritual Exercises,” *The Annual of the Society of Christian Ethics* 18 (1998): 70.

28. Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, ed., *Asceticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), xxix.

29. See James D. Davidson et al., “The Impact of Generations: Pre-Vatican II Catholics, Vatican II Catholics, and Post-Vatican II Catholics,” *The Search for the Common Ground* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1997), 111-139, esp. 119-120, 137-139.

30. James Keenan notes that the early Jesuit general Jerome Nadal “recommended that Jesuit confessors study cases an hour daily.” “The Return of Casuistry,” *Theological Studies* 57, no. 1 (1996): 127. Keenan cites John O’Malley’s *The First Jesuits*.
31. John A. McHugh, “Cases of Conscience,” *The Casuist* 15 (New York: Joseph F. Wagner, 1925). Reprinted in *Readings in Moral Theology*, vol. 11, 115.
32. William Spohn, “Spirituality and Ethics: Exploring the Connections,” *Theological Studies* 58, no. 1 (1997): 113.
33. Mother Teresa, *Mother Teresa: In My Own Words*, ed. José Luis González-Balado (New York: Gramercy Books, 1996), 52.
34. McCormick, “Moral Theology 1940-1989,” 66-67.
35. Lawrence Cunningham examines examples of fictional saints, among them Graham Greene’s whiskey priest (*The Power and the Glory*), Albert Camus’ Dr. Rieux (*The Plague*), and Walker Percy’s “firewatcher” priest (*Love in the Ruins*). *The Meaning of Saints* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1980), esp. 86-114.
36. *Ibid.*, 65.
37. *Ibid.*, 74.
38. John A. Coleman, S.J., “Conclusion: After Sainthood?” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. John Stratton Hawley (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1987), 223.
39. A “society without saints tends to allow virtue to sink to the level of utilitarian value” (*ibid.*, 221).
40. I was helped on this point by an essay by James Keating and David M. McCarthy, “Habits of Holiness: The Ordering of Moral-Mystical Living,” *Communio* 28 (Winter 2001:) 820-842. In keeping with their notion of a “moral-mystical living,” I intend to emphasize here that Christian moral living cannot be viewed only as an alternate cultural ethics. Christian ethicists must take account of the theological nature of that life and the ways in which the divine mystery upsets neat patterns of moral analysis. The saints can help us do that.
41. Keating and McCarthy, “Moral Theology with the Saints,” 209.
42. Karl Rahner, “The Church of the Saints,” *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3 (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), 100, cited by Donna L. Orsuto, “The Saint as Moral Paradigm,” *Spirituality and Morality: Integrating Prayer and Action*, ed. Dennis J. Billy, C.Ss.R., and Donna L. Orsuto (New York: Paulist Press, 1996), 131.
43. Edith Wyschogrod, *Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 26.

44. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 171.

45. John Henry Cardinal Newman, in *The Essential Newman*, ed. Vincent Ferrer Blehl, S.J. (New York: Mentor Omega Books, 1963), 335.

*Biographical information is true at time of publication.