"Beginning with Aristotelian virtue theory as a framework for Christian ethics, de Mingo Kaminouchi looks at the theological virtues before turning to the Beatitudes. He gently moves the reader beyond seeing the Beatitudes as corporal and spiritual works of mercy to be performed for the sake of others. Instead he challenges us to see the Beatitudes as pertinent virtues for the moral life. Virtues that if cultivated help us respond to God's call and change us over time in the image of Christ. In so doing he connects the moral life and the life of discipleship."

— Kathryn Lilla Cox
Visiting Research Associate
University of San Diego

"The author wisely and helpfully sets the stage for his presentation by concisely narrating the five centuries of Catholic moral theology and its renewal in the decades around the Second Vatican Council. In so doing, de Mingo Kaminouchi introduces readers to a wide range of voices in Catholic moral theology, some more familiar (Curran, Ratzinger, Fuchs, Hauerwas, Rubio, and Häring) and others less familiar, especially voices from Spain that rarely get a hearing among North American readers. The structure of the book is masterful, giving teachers and students solid foundations for an ongoing consequential discussion of Christian ethics in a world that continues to struggle to find its own grounding for conversations about value, character, and ethics. This introduction is a solid grammar of Christian ethics, and it deserves to find a home in the classrooms of North American colleges and seminaries."

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— Kate Ward, PhD
Assistant Professor of Theology
Marquette University

"Athens meets Jerusalem in this splendid text that introduces students to contemporary virtue ethics. Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi covers a great deal of ground: a survey of the history of moral theology, the Christian moral life as configuration to Christ, Aristotelian virtue ethics, and the ethics of the Beatitudes. The book is written in a lucid, engaging style that invites a response to the life of happiness it describes."

— Nickolas Becker, OSB
Assistant Professor of Theology
Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary

"Special thanks to Liturgical Press for bringing such an eloquent translation of the signature work of Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi into the English-speaking world. De Mingo is that rare Catholic bridge builder who spans biblical theology with theological ethics and introduces us to the grammar of virtue as we learn from revelation to be configured by Christ. Rightly he unfolds for us the beatitudes at the heart of this remarkable lesson and then concludes with an introduction to the three forms of love. I cannot recall ever such a compelling and ultimately satisfying introduction to Christian ethics. Bravo!"

— James F. Keenan, SJ
Canisius Professor
Boston College

An Introduction to Christian Ethics

A New Testament Perspective

Alberto de Mingo Kaminouchi

Translated by
Brother John of Taizé

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Introduction

From the very beginning, Christians understood that the response to the gift of faith encompasses one's entire existence. Being a Christian does not essentially mean accepting a series of ideas about God, but rather living a life transformed by the Holy Spirit in the service of the good news of God's Reign proclaimed by Jesus. "Christian ethics" is the name that we give to our reflections concerning this lived-out response to Christ.

Being a Christian is a question of practice; we learn to follow Christ by walking in his footsteps. For this reason, one of the names used by the church to refer to itself in the early days was "the Way." Christianity is not a theoretical system, but an existential response to the revelation of God in Jesus, sustained by the power of the Spirit. It is life. Theological reflection comes afterwards, trying to articulate explanatory models of what has occurred, of the way we are living and why. Moral theology is the branch of theology that is concerned with the practical dimension of faith: for this reason, "Christian ethics" and "moral theology" are synonyms.[1]

This book is an attempt to investigate the circular process established in the New Testament between faith and action, between God's revelation and the response of the believer.

[1] In these pages we will also use the terms "ethical" and "moral" as synonyms, following in this Marciano Vidal, *Moral de actitudes I. Moral fundamental*, Madrid 1990, 18.

Christian life can be understood as the process of transformation that welcoming the Good News of Jesus sets in motion, but this process cannot be sustained over time if there is no real change. For this reason, if believers do not collaborate by their own efforts with the action of the Holy Spirit, the force of the Gospel will ultimately be dissipated. When we do not live out what we believe, faith in the God who changes our being can end up being foreclosed.

One of the new developments that, in the past few decades, have enriched the panorama both of moral theology and of theological ethics has been the return to Aristotelian virtue-ethics, viewed as a fruitful framework to rethink morality at this time of crisis in the modern world. Such diverse men and women as the Indian economist and Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen, the Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor and the Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre have made use in various ways of the ethical legacy of the great Greek philosopher to propose alternatives to the present situation. From differing perspectives, each of them has pointed out that the cause of the current crisis in the Western world is a cultural, economic and political system that has rejected, in the name of individual freedom, the project of a happiness shared in common with others.

Our reflection overlaps with this broad movement. From the philosophical ethics of Aristotle we will take up the key concepts of *happiness*, *virtue* and *love*, which are suitable to describe the dynamics of transformation proper to the Christian life. Starting with them, we will strive to sketch the profile of "faith working through love" (Gal 5:6).

The itinerary of this book is divided into two parts. The first part, made up of three chapters, sets out the theoretical framework we will use in attempting to understand Christian ethics. The first chapter offers a brief panorama of moral theology. This discipline was born as a field of studies with its own status within Catholic theology as a result of the Council of Trent (1545–1563) and underwent a radical transformation at the time of the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965). The *casuistic*

morality of the period between those two councils was characterized by a focus on the law; according to this model, the task of moral theology consisted basically in applying moral norms to each concrete case. The basic problem with this way of reflecting on Christian behavior was that it produced a moral theology that, paradoxically, was not very theological. Obsessed with following the law, one could lose sight of the God who calls us to live lives of love. One of the lines of force of postconciliar theology has been to place in the foreground the relationship between God and the person and to present the Christian endeavor as a grateful response to the gift of God.

What characterizes and distinguishes Christianity from all other religious and philosophical proposals is the confession that the Son of God became flesh. Christ made our vulnerability, our flesh, a privileged locus of access to God. The cross is the supreme revelation of this disarming love. In Jesus, God comes to meet us and, without forcing us in any way, invites us to friendship with him. Accepting this call brings us into a process that will transform us into the image of Christ, towards the fullness of a new life that has already come to fulfillment in him through the resurrection. Christian ethics is the reflection on how we participate in this process through our behavior and our life. The second chapter presents this task under the title "configured by Christ."

The third chapter attempts an approximation to the three concepts of Aristotelian ethics that will serve as a guide in the second part of the book to reflect on the Christian life: *happiness*, *virtue* and *friendship*. The content that Christians give to these categories is very different from that which Aristotle assigned to them, but as a schema that articulates an understanding of human behavior, they are shown to be surprisingly useful to explain what happens to the believer who tries to respond with his or her life to the call of God.

The second half of our journey deals with the study of the Christian life using the concepts presented in the third chapter. Chapters four to six are entitled respectively "Happiness," "Virtue," and "Love." Through them we will examine the New

Testament witness of how the early Christians found happiness by taking part in the salvific plan of God that conformed them to the virtues of Christ. This faith made them part of a community in which they learned a love that excludes no one.

The chapter devoted to happiness deals with the purpose of life. The encounter with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit (Revelation) shows us that we are not in this world by chance. Life has a purpose: to participate in the saving plan of God. Happiness consists in beginning to experience this goal towards which we are heading and which Christ calls "the Kingdom of God."

The fifth chapter deals with the virtues. In it we explore the consequences of understanding happiness not as the possession of an external good, but as the acquisition of a form of being. For Christians, being happy does not mean enjoying possessions or pleasures but becoming like Jesus, the happy human being par excellence. For this reason, we will study in detail each one of the Beatitudes, a true compendium of the virtues of Jesus and his followers.

In the sixth chapter we will conclude by deepening our understanding of a third characteristic of Christian ethics: love. Since we are not saved all by ourselves, Jesus's project calls us to be part of a community, which is a school of loving. The New Testament shows us how the proclamation of the Kingdom is inseparable from the creation of a concrete network of brothers and sisters always open to hospitality. Being a believer means taking part in this proposal of a fraternity open to all, because no one is excluded from the love of God.

Our hope is that this journey on which we are setting out will contribute to a reflection on the beauty of the Christian life. In it, faith and works—believing and acting—are two faces of the same coin. For this reason, only by keeping them together can we do justice to what it means to respond with our entire being to God's revelation, whose Reign Jesus came to inaugurate.

CHAPTER ONE

Broadening Ethical Reflection

From Trent to Vatican II: Casuistic Morality

Catholic moral theology as an independent discipline has a birthday: July 15, 1563. On that day, the twenty-third session of the Council of Trent was held. Canon XVIII was approved, which mandated the creation of seminaries to promote the adequate formation of candidates to the priesthood.

The principal objective of the council was to respond to the challenge of the Protestant Reformation by summoning the Catholic Church to achieve its own reform from within.

The council fathers understood that, in order to foster true renewal in the Christian people, a more and better prepared clergy was required. Until then there were no universal norms that established what types of studies aspirants to holy orders had to undertake, and many bishops ordained candidates who lacked even a minimal preparation to accomplish their ministry properly. Seminaries were designed as the key institutions to form clergy who would be better trained intellectually and more disciplined morally.

The canon of the Council of Trent set out in a concrete and precise fashion the conditions those who aspired to be seminarians had to fulfill; in addition, it expressed the lifestyle that those admitted to the seminary were required to practice and determined the characteristics of their devotional life. Finally,

the canon went into the minutest details when it came to regulating their daily schedule.

Concerning the subjects to be taught in the classrooms, the canon prescribed the following:

> They shall learn grammar, singing, ecclesiastical computation, and the other liberal arts; they shall be instructed in sacred Scripture; ecclesiastical works; the homilies of the saints; the manner of administering the sacraments, especially those things which shall seem adapted to enable them to hear confessions; and the forms of the rites and ceremonies.[1]

"Moral theology" was the name given to the course that would be offered in these new centers to instruct the students in "those things which shall seem adapted to enable them to hear confessions." Thus a new theological discipline was born, incorporated into the academic curriculum for an eminently practical reason: to form the future priest to celebrate the sacrament of penance. In this respect Bernhard Häring comments:

> It is important to remind ourselves that the moral theology that most of us were taught in our seminaries twenty or thirty years ago is a rather recent product. Through fifteen centuries the Catholic Church had nothing like that. It is not "the" tradition but is one late tradition; and as we shall see, it was never unchallenged within the Roman Catholic Church. That there is nothing similar in the Orthodox or Protestant Churches is no wonder, since this type of moral theology came into being only after the great separation.[2]

Following the indications of Trent, moral theology was oriented towards finding solutions for cases of conscience in the

[1] Canon XVIII, in http://www.thecounciloftrent.com/ch23.htm, Decree on Reformation, ch. XI. "Ecclesiastical computation" is the science of calculating the moveable feasts of the liturgical calendar.

[2] B. Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ: Moral Theology for Clergy and Laity*, Vol. I: General Moral Theology, New York 1978, 45.

confessional. The role of the confessor was seen as mainly that of a judge. The priest had to be prepared to discern whether the penitent had sinned and, in that case, if the fault was venial, grave or mortal. He had to determine, in addition, the number and the kind of all the mortal sins. The function of the moralist was to teach him to apply principles and norms to concrete cases in order to evaluate the sins and their gravity. For this reason, this kind of ethical reflection received the name of "casuistic morality."

Because of this, moral theology was more an examination of sin than a comprehensive study of Christian behavior, and so it left most of Christian life outside its area of interest. The works of mercy, discipleship, asceticism and mysticism continued to be part of Christian practice, but not of moral theology; at best, they were relegated to other fields of theology, when they were not simply ignored in the academic world.

A manual of Catholic morality published in 1907 in the United States describes clearly in its introduction the purpose and limits of this discipline:

> We must ask the reader to bear in mind that manuals of moral theology are technical works intended to help the confessor and the parish priest in the discharge of their duties. They are as technical as the textbooks of the lawyer and the doctor. They are not intended for edification, nor do they hold up a high ideal of Christian perfection for the imitation of the faithful. They deal with what is of obligation under pain of sin; they are books of moral pathology. They are necessary for the Catholic priest to enable him to administer the sacrament of Penance and to fulfil his other duties; they are intended to serve this purpose, and they should not be censured for not being what they were never intended to be. Ascetical and mystical literature which treats of the higher spiritual life is very abundant in the Catholic Church, and it should be consulted by those who desire to know the lofty ideals of life which the Catholic Church places before her children and encourages them to practice. Moral theology proposes to itself the humbler but still necessary task of

> defining what is right and what wrong in all the practical relations of the Christian life. This all, but more especially priests, should know. The first step on the right road of conduct is to avoid evil; in the doing of good each will act according to his vocation and opportunities, moved and stirred by the grace of God, who works in all as he wills.[3]

The apologetic tone of this text is obvious. In a country such as the United States with a Protestant majority, Catholic theology had to reply to the criticisms that Christians of the Reformation made of Catholic morality. It is easy to read between the lines the accusations that must have been going through the author's mind: "The 'papists' are only concerned with sin; they are not interested in doing good. They are legalistic, obsessed with rules." Thomas Slater replied to these objections by saying that, in fact, moral theology does deal with sin and only with sin, but the ethical life of Catholics goes far beyond the precepts of moral theology: "Ascetical and mystical literature which treats of the higher spiritual life is very abundant in the Catholic Church," he affirms proudly.

The casuistic morality of the manuals has its usefulness, but Christian faith would not have survived in the Catholic Church if its moral life was limited only to what its moral theology dealt with. Fortunately, that was not the case. The Council of Trent also gave rise to new forms of spirituality that entailed a renewal of Christian life. To quote Häring again:

> On the one hand, a truly Catholic reform, whose most noble representatives were, among others, St. Teresa of Avila and St. John of the Cross, was giving the Church profound works on a spirituality that, at least partially, continued the tradition of the great church fathers of whom we have spoken.

[3] T. B. Slater, *A Manual of Moral Theology for English-Speaking Countries*, New York 1918, v–vi. This work was the first manual of Catholic moral theology published in English. Normally books of this kind were written in Latin.

> On the other hand, there was developing a moral theology just for the solution of cases in the confessional. In this theology, the confessor's role was understood chiefly as a judge. Not only had he to know whether the penitent had sinned but also whether he had committed a grave sin (frequently equated with mortal sin) and to determine accurately the number and species of all these mortal sins. Such a moral theology no longer promotes the patterns of discipleship, of that righteousness that comes from God's justifying action and in loving response to his call to become ever more the image and likeness of his own mercy. All this was left out or at least left to dogmatic or spiritual theology.[4]

Too often this more elevated spirituality, which recovered aspects neglected by morality, remained restricted to small groups such as certain religious orders. The moral life of the average Christian, obliged only to keep the commandments, tended to remain cut off from the experience of a personal relationship with God, without which no Christian life can survive. Aware of this, men and women dedicated to pastoral concern for ordinary people attempted to create systems of devotional and charitable practices that gave shape to forms of popular piety able to sustain a profoundly Christian existence. Saint Alphonsus Liguori (1696–1787), considered by many the most important moralist in the period between Trent and Vatican II, devoted the best of his energies to promoting a life of prayer and Christian commitment among the most indigent populations of the South of Italy.[5]

[4] B. Häring, *Free and Faithful in Christ*, I, 46.

[5] Saint Alphonsus is known by theologians for his *Theologia Moralis*, arguably the most influential work of casuistic morality of all time. But he is also the author of *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, a book which shows his pastoral sensitivity. This work recommends Christian practices that go far beyond avoiding sin, the obsession of the moral theology of his day. Cf. A. Liguori, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ*, Liguori MO 1999.

Despite these attempts, the true life of believers could not but feel the effects of a moral theology centered exclusively on sin. Some of its negative consequences are still alive and well today in certain forms of Catholicism:

1. *Minimalism*. An ethics centered on sin does not teach people to do good, but to avoid evil and occasions of sin. It favors a mentality that tries to do as little as possible, as long as the law is not broken, because nothing is gained by doing more than is necessary. Moreover, any unnecessary act, even if good in itself, can lead to situations of risk. When the main thing is to observe the law, moral generosity is truncated and replaced by an ethical minimalism.

2. *Legalism*. If the criterion of moral goodness lies in keeping the law, I can consider myself "good" if I do formally what is prescribed. We should not forget, however, that a merely external observance of norms can conceal a profound existential dishonesty.

3. *Atrophy of the conscience*. Like every other human capacity, moral discernment languishes if it is not exercised. Following the rules blindly creates personalities reluctant to think for themselves. When we are accustomed to seek security in the observance of the law, turning to authorities who decide for us in cases of doubt, our personal conscience remains underdeveloped and never reaches its adult stature.

4. *Guilt*. However hard we try, none of us is able to follow all the rules strictly. When this observance becomes obsessive, feelings of guilt are inevitable for having broken this or that law. In extreme cases, these feelings of guilt lead to scrupulosity, which can even go so far as to become a mental illness, a variation of the obsessive-compulsive disorder. Without going that far, some forms of living one's faith have been characterized by an unhealthy sense of guilt. Many people have reacted against this not only

by rejecting the moral law, but even by abandoning their faith.

5. *Individualism*. I have to worry first of all about saving my own soul. What others do is their problem.

6. *Idolatry of the norm*. The preconciliar treatises on moral theology hardly mentioned God at all. Certainly, they took for granted that God was the ultimate guarantee of every moral norm, but they left God out of their arguments, which went no further than the law. The result was that the moral theology of those manuals was, paradoxically, not very theological: once we have the norm to obey, God can be relegated to second place. The trees of each case of conscience kept people from seeing the forest of the person in his or her relationship to God.

It is important to point out that these negative effects are not due to the fact of employing norms or laws in moral reflection, but rather of making sin and the law the center of interest. Moral laws are very useful, especially in complex circumstances that require a concrete and urgent response; but when the law is placed at the center, Christian life loses its way, namely its orientation towards God.

The Renewal of Ethics around Vatican II

At the beginning of the twentieth century, moral theology was in urgent need of renewal to rediscover the theological lodestar it had lost. In fact, criticisms of casuistic morality were not lacking, especially in the German-speaking area. After the Second World War, such criticisms became more vocal on the part of French-speaking authors.[6]

[6] M. Vidal, *La Teología moral. Renovación conciliar y tareas de futuro*, in C. Floristán – J. J. Tamayo (eds.), *El Vaticano II, veinte años después*, Madrid 1985, 202.

CHAPTER THREE

A Grammar of Ethics

Christian ethics is at the service of the changes that take place when the God of Jesus Christ becomes present in our lives. With the passing of time and the support of our collaboration, the Holy Spirit configures us to the image of Jesus. As we pointed out in the previous chapter, this transformation does not occur only on an emotional or intellectual level; it has its center of gravity in the body.

Modern neuroscience uses the expression "neuroplasticity" to refer to an intrinsic property of the human brain, which consists in the ability to modify the synaptic connections between the neurons, to make new habits possible in response to new needs.[1] This capacity of the brain to change its hardwiring and acquire new skills is only the most extreme case of the "open architecture" with which the human body is designed. The members of our species are not limited to one type of food; our taste can be educated so that we even find raw fish or moldy cheese tasty. Our sexual desire is not limited to fertile periods like most animals, nor are our courtship rituals fixed once and for all. Our hands can be taught to play a violin or to pilot a space shuttle. Our muscles can be trained to accomplish gymnastic feats or to break speed and endurance records

[1] A. Pascual-Leone – A. Amedi – F. Fregni – L. B. Merabet, "The Plastic Human Brain Cortex," *Annual Review of Neuroscience* 28 (2005).

that seemed unbeatable, but they can also atrophy on a sofa. We human beings are open systems that can channel our possibilities in different directions and reach our true potential only by training and exercise.

We are social beings as well. We are born more destitute than any other animal. We need to receive the exquisite care of a mother to survive and develop our most fundamental abilities. Our most basic social capacity, communicating through language, is acquired through contact with other people who, from infancy, take us seriously enough to speak to us. Our period of immaturity is the longest of any animal species, and in complex societies like ours the period of formation extends beyond physical maturity. Even as adults we cannot enjoy a full life alone: we require a vast social network that interacts with us.

These two ideas, the need for training as well as social relations so that human potential can reach fullness, were at the basis of the moral tradition that originated with Aristotle (384–322 BCE) and is called "virtue ethics." This current of moral thought has as its central category not law, but virtue. We call "virtue" a capacity, developed through learning and exercise in social contexts, that forms part of the character of a person, of what he or she is.

The Surprising Return to Aristotle

Since the last quarter of the twentieth century we have seen, in the realm of philosophy and of Christian theology, a growing interest in virtue ethics.[2] In addition, in the more special-

[2] According to a bibliographical study published in 1997, virtue ethics took first place among the interests of moral theologians in the United States. Cf. H. Schlögel, "Tugend – Kasuistik – Biographie: Trends und ökumenische Perspektiven in der Moraltheologie der USA," *Catholica* 51 (1997). Since then, this tendency has been confirmed in the English-speaking world as well as in other linguistic areas. Cf., for example, M. Vidal, "¿Es posible actualizar, de forma inteligente e innovadora, la 'ética

ized field of New Testament ethics, in recent years a number of works have appeared that show the possibilities of this focus.[3]

In the first chapter, we pointed out that the Council of Trent (1545–1563) had fostered the adoption of the casuistic paradigm in Catholic morality. This approach was centered on the law and its application to concrete cases. Two centuries after this council, and independently of it, a secular moral philosophy began to develop in Europe whose goal was to find a basis for ethics within the limits of pure reason. Certain philosophers, notably David Hume (1711–1776) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), tried to establish the legitimacy of moral laws in purely rational terms, independent of any arguments based on Christian revelation.

At the origins of this project we find the great military conflicts that devastated Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The most serious was the Thirty Years' War, which began when the Protestant nobility of Bohemia rebelled against the Catholic emperor Ferdinand II in an episode known as the Second Defenestration of Prague (1618). The conflict spread to all of central Europe, fanned by the hatred that erupted between the different Christian confessions and by the ambition of the rulers to increase their power. The result was the bloodiest war that the continent had ever known. Some regions lost half of their population through both direct casualties and the famines and epidemics caused by the violence.

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de la virtud'?" *Moralia* 27 (2004) 382–390; M. Martinez Mauri, "Perspectivas actuales sobre la virtud: Estudio bibliográfico," *Pensamiento* 48 (1992), and the bibliography that the review *Moralia* publishes each year.

[3] D. S. Cunningham, *Christian Ethics: The End of the Law*, London 2008; D. J. Harrington – J. F. Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics: Building Bridges between New Testament Studies and Moral Theology*, Lanham 2002; N. T. Wright, *Virtue Reborn*, London 2010. The work of W. C. Spohn, *Go and Do Likewise: Jesus and Ethics*, New York 1999, can be considered groundbreaking in the dialogue between virtue ethics and New Testament studies in Catholic morality.

After the signing of the peace treaty of Westphalia (1648), a new basis had to be found for coexistence. It was evident, at any rate, that the ideal of a Europe united under a common Christian heritage had been buried on the battlefields. Some of the most brilliant thinkers of Europe launched the project to establish ethics and politics on a more secure basis than that of a revelation, the different interpretations of which had caused so much misfortune. Their aspiration was that reason could dawn in a Europe over which religious fanaticism had cast a shadow.[4]

The thinkers of the Enlightenment affirmed that it was possible to justify the morality of acts, both in the private and in the public spheres, without any reference to a transcendent end. This silence about ends and the turning away from medieval Christian morality characterized the ethical project of the Enlightenment in its different variations. Thinkers as distinct as Kant, Hume and Locke agreed in defining the object of moral reflection as the act and not the actor. In this way, a curious coincidence occurred: both in its Catholic and its secular versions, Western ethics of the last centuries centered its attention on the study of norms. As a result, when we speak of ethics today, people tacitly assume that we are referring to laws and obligations, to decisions we have to take, especially in difficult circumstances.

We are so accustomed to the fact that ethics deals with laws and obligations that it may surprise us to discover that, at the beginning of the Western philosophical tradition, morality had little to do with norms or specific cases. Its task was quite different. For Aristotle, the author of the first treatises on ethics in our cultural tradition—*Nichomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*[5]—the purpose of moral philosophy is to help people to

[4] Cf. R. Gascoigne, *The Public Forum and Christian Ethics*, Cambridge 2008, 30–31.

[5] There is a third work of ethics whose attribution to Aristotle is disputed: *Magna Moralia*.

attain happiness by means of a virtuous life. The word "law" (*nomos*) almost never appears in these works and, when it does, it refers to civil law and not moral norms. In these treatises, Aristotle almost never discusses cases of conscience or decisions; his interest lies not in isolated acts taken out of context, but in the habitual activities that form the character of a person. The basic concepts that structure his reflection are happiness, virtue and friendship.

In the last few decades we have seen a waning of that era of civilization that we call the modern age, and more and more authors are turning their eyes to the moral tradition that had been marginalized with the emergence of Enlightenment thought. At the beginning of this "return to virtue" we find the critical and groundbreaking thought of Alasdair MacIntyre. His work, *After Virtue*, published in 1981, constitutes a frontal attack on the philosophical project of the Enlightenment.[6] After showing the incoherence of the different ethical systems that have proliferated in the Western world from the beginnings of the modern era until today, MacIntyre proposes a return to the thought of Aristotle and to his virtue ethics as the only way out of the situation of moral chaos that, in his opinion, characterizes our time.

According to MacIntyre's analysis, the different philosophical schools of the Enlightenment, although differing greatly among themselves, all assume as their project the rational justification of moral norms. According to this program, ethics should be concerned with regulating actions by means of laws, while bracketing the intentions and aims with which people operate. MacIntyre criticizes this approach, arguing that, in the final analysis, what makes a human act intelligible is its

[6] MacIntyre was born in Glasgow (Scotland) in 1929, although he spent most of his academic career in the United States, ending up at the University of Notre Dame (Indiana). He is the author of many books, but is known primarily for the one mentioned here: *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, Notre Dame 1981. The second and third editions (1984 and 2007) retain the same text, while adding respectively an epilogue and a new prologue.

purpose; in fact, we cannot have a rational conversation about ethics if we exclude the theme of the aims of the actions.

The ethical systems of modernity are centered on the law—which has to be equal for everyone—and try to resolve the morality of actions independently of the person who accomplishes them and the reason why he or she does so. In this way a dichotomy is established between intentionality and content that, according to MacIntyre, makes the moral act unintelligible, because if we do not understand why a person does what he or she does, we will never exactly understand the person's behavior. We can only understand the purpose of an act when it is considered within the horizon of the aim that the person who accomplishes it gives to his or her life as a whole. The axiom that MacIntyre defends is one that Aristotle already expressed in his day: acts have a moral import to the extent to which they are oriented to the aims of human life. We can only understand a moral act when we grasp its meaning, but to understand the meaning of an act we have to situate it within the horizon of the destination towards which the person who accomplished it orients his or her existence.

It is clear that nowadays not everyone believes that his or her life has a transcendent meaning. By "transcendent" we do not necessarily mean "religious"; it would be enough to give it the meaning that Aristotle—who was not a particularly spiritual man—gave to his idea of "the good." By "transcendent" we mean, at least, something that points towards a common good that goes beyond the transient desires of the individual. For many people, life today has no other meaning than to accumulate material possessions and pleasurable experiences. Aristotle would not have hesitated in calling this way of thinking and acting irrational. The Aristotelian moral tradition considers that people act rationally when they orient their lives to a good shared in common with other human beings. In other words, a rational ethical dialogue is possible only among persons who believe that human life has a meaning that goes beyond the whims of each individual.

MacIntyre argues that what remains as a consensus on the legitimacy of moral norms in our culture is only the last bastion of a civilization in ruins. But such a consensus can be sustained only if, in the long run, a rational dialogue concerning the aims of human life can be recovered and if we begin once again a discussion about the content of the common good in our societies. According to MacIntyre, liberal culture, by remaining silent about the purpose and the destination of human life, creates a moral and intellectual vacuum that is at the root of the inability to reach rational agreements regarding ethical problems. He states dramatically that to find a way out of the present crisis only two possibilities remain: to slide towards the nihilism of Nietszche, or to return to a teleological ethics like that of Aristotle.

Aristotelian Ethics in Three Words

Eudaimonia

In agreement with Aristotle, both ethics and the rest of human activities are accomplished for an end. Let us allow him to say this in his own words:

> Every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action (*praxis*) and pursuit, is thought to aim at some good . . . the end (*telos*) of the medical art is health, that of shipbuilding a vessel, that of strategy victory, that of economics wealth. (*Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, 1 [1094a, 1–2, 8–10])[7]

Each activity receives its meaning from an end, and all the activities taken together must converge towards an ultimate end. Otherwise, "the process would go on to infinity, so that our desire would be empty and vain" (ibid. I, 2 [1094a, 21–22]).

[7] The quotations from Aristotle are taken from *The Internet Classics Archive*, translated by W. D. Ross, http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.1.i.html, indicating in square brackets the numbers of Bekker.

CHAPTER FOUR

Happiness

Happiness or Utility? That Is the Question

Aristotle affirmed that people cannot be happy without seeking an *inner* good. According to the philosopher, human fulfillment cannot be realized by possessing wealth or enjoying pleasures or fame. A truly human happiness can only be found within, in other words, in that which someone *is*, not in what they possess or enjoy. Being happy means acquiring, through education and practice, a certain form of being.

In Aristotle's ethics, the virtues denote the characteristics of the happy human being. The philosopher does not forget, however, that as human beings we are "social animals," and what forms us more than anything else are the relationships that we maintain with others. Only by interacting with others can we reach the full measure of our potential.

Aristotle imagined the ideal society as a *polis* in which its citizens took seriously the cultivation of virtue. In other words, they formed and trained themselves to be the best they could be, not only by developing their professional abilities and their technical capacities, but also by improving their moral character. For the philosopher, happiness is only possible when virtuous—just, sensible, courageous—men seek the *common good* together, a good which is good precisely because it is held in common. Being happy means becoming a worthy member of this city, built through the efforts of all.

The ideal society proposed by capitalism is fundamentally different from the ideal of Aristotle, because in it the concept of the common good is absent. According to the prevailing economic theory today, society functions because each person seeks his or her own interest. As Adam Smith said in a phrase that has become famous: "It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities but of their advantages."[1] According to the author of *The Wealth of Nations*, the key to the development of peoples is allowing this free play by which each individual seeks his or her self-interest, because he considers that the combined effect of a multitude of persons, each trying to maximize his or her own benefits, will end up leading society as a whole to greater prosperity.[2]

It is true that, thanks to the market economy, we enjoy levels of material production unparalleled in human history. The free initiative of entrepreneurs is the main cause of the abundance that some benefit from today, but the prosperity advocated by the economists can never be equated with the *common good*

[1] A. Smith, *The Wealth of Nations, Books I–III, with an Introduction by Andrew Skinner*, Harmondsworth 1998, 119. The first edition was published in 1776. Although in *The Wealth of Nations*, Smith considers self-love as the exclusive motivation for human behavior, he begins his book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), by writing: "How selfish so ever man may be supposed, there are evidently some principles in his nature, which interest him in the fortune of others, and render their happiness necessary to him, though he derives nothing from it, except the pleasure of seeing it." This apparent contradiction is resolved by the current capitalist theory by omitting the assertion in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* and considering self-interest as the only motivation that has economic consequences. The Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen tried to reconcile both of Smith's affirmations in *On Ethics and Economics*, Oxford/New York 1987, 12.

[2] D. Acemoglu – J. A. Robinson, *Why Nations Fail: The Origins of Power, Prosperity, and Poverty*, New York 2012; this work explores the relationship between free initiative and material prosperity.

defined by Aristotle, because it is not a project shared by the citizens, but rather the aggregate of the goods produced by them.

Economics owes much of its prestige to the fact that it is presented as a science similar to the natural sciences. What characterizes a natural science, however, is that the object of its study behaves in a predictable fashion, like the stars in the sky or the molecules in a chemical reactor. According to the prevailing theory in economics, what makes human behavior predictable is that people act in order to maximize *utility*.

"Utility" is the central concept of economics. It is defined as the quantitative value that measures the satisfaction produced by consuming a good or a service. It can also be defined as the quantity of means of exchange necessary to obtain these goods and services. Expressed more simply, utility is but another name for money and all that can be bought with it.

According to this way of looking at things, people act "rationally" when each individual adopts the most adequate strategy to obtain the most utility possible, given his or her circumstances. *Homo oeconomicus* is a predictable being, because he always acts "rationally," adopting the line of behavior that leads him to earn the most money possible and to spend it to obtain the greatest satisfaction possible.[3] Aristotle would not hesitate to call such people, who seek to attain external goods exclusively, irrational.

As a result, we are confronted with two alternative definitions of rationality. To illustrate them, let us imagine two brothers, two little boys fighting over the same toy. A mother who

[3] Behavioral economics attempts to introduce into the prevailing economic theory psychological factors that cause real behavior to differ from rationality, but it does not challenge—at least for now—the definition of rational behavior as the maximization of utility, but rather assumes it. A. Samson (ed.), *The Behavioral Economics Guide 2014*. Retrieved from behavioraleconomics.com. The Israeli psychologist Daniel Kahneman won the Nobel Prize for Economics in 2002 for his contributions to this new field, today in vogue, of behavioral economics.

would follow the theory that extols the maximization of utility would find the correct solution to the conflict between her sons by giving each boy a toy, so that each one can enjoy his own good without the loss of utility that sharing with his brother would cause. On the other hand, a mother attempting to educate them according to the Aristotelian vision of happiness would try to teach the boys to share, showing them that there is more joy in playing together than in each one having his own toy.

According to this latter way of coping with life, morality does not simply consist in obeying certain established norms to keep individuals who each seek their own interest from colliding, but in educating each person to discover a good beyond the self-centered enjoyment of goods and services. For Aristotle, the moral quality of a person is shown in his ability to learn to find greater satisfaction in realizing the common good rather than in individually enjoying goods and services.

At the beginning of this chapter on Christian happiness we turned to Aristotle, because his idea of happiness as a good internal to the person, one that is acquired in collaboration with others in pursuing the common good, is fundamental to understanding what we Christians consider happiness, especially at a time when for most of the culture happiness and utility are synonymous.

No one can deny that the economy plays an important role in society. It can help us to create more efficient institutions and to use scarce resources better. Nonetheless, an economic fundamentalism that sees the human being only as an individual producer/consumer keeps us from understanding the Good News of Christ, because the happiness of which Jesus speaks is not individualistic. In fact, faith is not a means of feeling better about myself or reaching a happiness in the beyond, a means which I would use privately. Gospel happiness is shared, or it is nothing.

Just like Aristotle, Christianity understands that happiness is a form of being that is acquired by committing ourselves together with others to something that transcends us. I can

only be truly happy when I surrender myself to a project that is greater than the search for my self-interest. For the philosopher, this project was the building of a city in which justice and friendship reigned; for the Christian it is the Kingdom of God, which is also imagined as a city in the book of Revelation: "And I saw the holy city, the New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven, from God, prepared like a bride adorned for her husband" (Rev 21:2).

Salvation is not conceived here as the ascent of individual souls going up to Paradise, each one enjoying its own private portion of happiness, but as the descent from heaven of a city in which happiness is a shared social reality. In this sense, Christian happiness has a *political* dimension similar to the Aristotelian ideal and is unlike spiritualistic outlooks principally concerned with calming the anxieties of the individual.

There is a difference, however, between Aristotelian and Christian ethics, since for the latter happiness is not conquered but is received as a gift, a gift from God.

A Concrete Proposal of Fraternity

To the question "What is Christianity?" many believers and non-believers would answer today by saying that it is one of the great religions, the one founded by Christ, understanding by religion something like a collection of beliefs about God and about what people can hope for after death, expressed by means of a host of rites and practices. This way of understanding Christianity is consistent with the way of understanding Christian revelation that prevailed in the Catholic Church from the time between the councils of Trent and Vatican II. According to this model, revelation consists above all in the transmission by God to the Church of a number of truths—the "deposit of faith"—that must be protected and kept free from all error.

As we explained in the second chapter, one of the great contributions of the Second Vatican Council was to achieve a deeper understanding of revelation. The dogmatic constitution

Dei Verbum understands revelation above all as the initiative of God who "revealed himself" in Christ to offer us the possibility of a personal encounter. No one is excluded; we are all invited to become part of this communion, which aspires to expand to include the entire earth.

Whereas for Aristotle happiness is found in the process of building the city, for Christianity God takes the initiative as the architect of this *polis* and places himself at its center, as the nucleus of a network that connects all the citizens with him and with one another: "I saw no temple in the city, for the Lord God almighty is its temple, as well as the Lamb. And the city needs no sun or moon to illuminate it, for the glory of God shines in it, and its lamp is the Lamb" (Rev 21:22-23).

Christ did not come to start a new religion, but to offer every human being the possibility of taking part in a communion with God that also brings human beings into a mutual relationship.[4] This is the meaning he gave to his life and this is the proposal to which we are committed if we call ourselves his followers. Christianity is not a system of ideas, and the church is not a club whose members find their identity in the orthodoxy of their creed. Naturally, the words we use to express our faith are important, but they are not in themselves faith. Faith is the active acceptance of the offer of Jesus to reconcile us with God, which makes us members of a community configured by a project he called "the Kingdom of God."

Brother John, a member of the ecumenical community of Taizé, defines the Christian faith beautifully as "the offer *in progress* of a universal communion in God."[5] By faith we do not only accept certain ideas; we welcome God in person who

[4] Brother Roger of Taizé (1915–2005) often repeated: "Christ did not come to earth to start a new religion, but to offer to every human being a communion in God."

[5] Brother John of Taizé, *Friends in Christ: Paths to a New Understanding of Church*, Maryknoll 2012, 26. In the original, the entire definition is in italics and not just the words "in progress."

reveals himself to us in Christ. By being in communion with God, we enter into a network of brothers and sisters that unites us with others. This proposal is universal, since no one is excluded, but at the same time it is concrete.

Christianity, before being a theory about God and human fraternity, is a concrete proposal. What we find at its core are not universal principles, but a particular human being, Jesus of Nazareth. In him we recognize the Son of God, who exists in a unique relationship with the Creator. The church understands itself as a network of communion, starting from Christ and under the impulsion of the Spirit, that spreads out from person to person in all the directions of space and time.

This concrete character makes the Christian faith problematic, because Christianity cannot take refuge in the limbo of ideas. It is not a philosophy that can remain unscathed by the way its followers live. The sins of the church are not only inconsistencies with respect to the proposed ideal, but objective rents in that network that interrupt its extension towards universal fraternity.

For the sake of truth and justice, it is necessary to affirm that Christians have done much good in the course of history. Many of the things that make life more beautiful and worthwhile today—cultural achievements, works of art, humanitarian institutions, etc.—would not exist if Christianity had not been around for the last two thousand years. But we must also recognize its errors and crimes, and the list is long. These acts against fraternity are a scandal for faith, as the Second Vatican Council recognized: "To the extent that [believers] . . . fail in their religious, moral, or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than to reveal the true nature of God" (*Gaudium et Spes* 19).

Nevertheless, these errors themselves are at the same time a cause for astonishment for Christians, because they reveal to what extent God has placed himself in the hands of a concrete community of fallible men and women. If the mystery of the incarnation fills us with admiration—God who emptied

himself to assume the human condition—it is just as amazing to contemplate the fact that Christ turned the poor sinners who are Christians into his Body, and designated them as representatives of his project for humanity.

What should be the morality of a church that confesses itself to be the bearer of this proposal of universal fraternity? This is the question we wish to answer in this book. Christian ethics cannot, in the final analysis, be at the service of maintaining the established order, nor can its task consist in establishing laws of conduct that sustain this order. On the contrary, it exists to serve a plan oriented towards the future. It is the ethics of a group of women and men who have agreed to put their lives at the service of the dream of Jesus.

The faith of this group is not an intellectual assent, however, but a transformation that occurs in the contact with that God who has been revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The personal transformation that takes place in the members of this group is inseparable from their participation in a community that is defined by its mission: to reconcile the human family so that it becomes a reflection of that communion of love which is the Trinity.

Happiness is the name we give to the goal of this transformation. In this sense, happiness is a project that will only be fully realized in the Kingdom of God, but Jesus came into the world in order to tell us that it is possible to begin to experience the Kingdom here and now. Unlike the apocalyptical prophets, Christ did not predict an inbreaking of God to end history in a proximate future. His message is: "The Kingdom of God is at hand." The Kingdom of God is becoming a reality here and now in the transformation of people and their relationships. The resurrection of Jesus and the sending forth of the Spirit definitively inspired those who believed in him to engage with this vision. Being Christian is nothing other than learning to be happy, but the happiness shown to us by Jesus is just as surprising as the God who was revealed as Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

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