

THE VOCATION OF THE CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGIAN Formed in the Alphonsian Tradition¹

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Introduction

During my many years of teaching in this postgraduate institute, I have often asked myself what it means to be a Catholic moral theologian, and, more precisely, one formed in the Alphonsian tradition. After much thought and reflection on what we do here at the Alphonsian Academy and how we relate to one another and go about our business, I do not think there is a single answer to this question.

Catholic moral theology today has become so vast and involves so many fields of knowledge that it would be virtually impossible to arrive at a single, universally valid description of a typical practitioner of this important theological discipline. What is more, a mere glance at the history of Catholic moral theology shows that a number of traditions of moral discourse have often coexisted, sometimes peaceably, sometimes not, within the Catholicism itself. Indeed, the tensions among them have often been responsible for preventing Catholic moral theology from stagnating and helped to propel it forward. The difference between Bonaventure and Thomas Aquinas on the authority of conscience is a case in point. The theological wars during the age of casuistry involving probabilism, probabiliorism, and the

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equiprobabilist position of Alphonsus, yet another. The post-Vatican II debate on normative ethics, still another².

What is more, I do not believe that we can generalize by speaking of the legacy left to the Church by St. Alphonsus as if it were a single, homogeneous entity. On the contrary, within the Church, within the Redemptorist Congregation, within this very Academy, there are differences in approach concerning Alphonsus's significance for the Catholic moral and spiritual life and what impact it should have on a moral theologian's formation and outlook. Although these approaches tend to overlap and generally complement each other, they all compete for a wider hearing in the intellectual forum and seek a growing influence in both academic and pastoral settings. One approach, for example, emphasizes the importance of a strict historical exposition and critical assimilation of Alphonsus's moral and spiritual doctrine. Another focuses on providing a relevant translation of his moral and spiritual outlook, one appropriately interpreted and suitably adapted to the needs of the world today. Still another believes that the entire moral theological curriculum should be imbued with Alphonsus's spirit of pastoral benignity and care for the poor³.

Although nearly everyone in this academic institution would agree that a strong interdisciplinary focus is the best way to equip future Catholic moral theologians with the tools they need for their min-

² For the differences between Bonaventure and Aquinas on the authority of conscience, see DENNIS J. BILLY, "The Authority of Conscience in Bonaventure and Aquinas," *StMor* 31(1993) 237-63. For the debates on probabilism in Catholic moral casuistry, see SERVAIS PINCKAERS, *Les sources de la morale chrétienne*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1985, 276-79; THÉODULE REY-MERMET, *La morale selon Saint Alphonse de Liguori*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1987, 28-32. For the debate on normative ethics in in post-Vatican II Catholic moral theology, see GIUSEPPE ANGELINI, *Teologia morale fondamentale: Tradizione, Scrittura e teoria*, Glossa, Milano 1999, 233-35.

³ For a brief presentation of the various approaches to Alphonsian study, see DENNIS J. BILLY, *With Open Heart: Spiritual Direction in the Alphonsian Tradition*, Liguori Publications, Liguori 2003, xii-xiv.

istry, not all will agree on how much emphasis should be given in the curriculum to the critical historical study and interpretative adaptation of Alphonsus's teachings. This disagreement is of no small concern and, at some point, will need to be confronted. As an institute of postgraduate studies rooted in the Alphonsian tradition, we need to ask ourselves in what concrete ways does Alphonsus's spirit and teaching influence our approach to the teaching and study of Catholic moral theology today. How have we made his approach to moral theology relevant for today? What difference does his spirit and teaching make to the way we go about doing moral theology? To my mind, an adequate response to such questions has much to do with considering Catholic moral theology from the point of view of vocation and call.

1. A Call within a Call

Before going any further, let me step back and provide a larger context for speaking about the vocation of the Catholic moral theologian. To my mind, the best way to describe this vocation is as "a call within a call" or, better yet, as "a call within a call within a call within a call." It is not unlike a Chinese puzzle box, where one box conceals a slightly smaller box, which itself conceals a slightly smaller box, and then another even smaller box, and so on, until one finally reaches the smallest of the small. To be a Catholic moral theologian presupposes a number of prior callings: (1) the call to discipleship, (2) the call to Catholic discipleship, (3) the call to a particular state of life in the Church (i.e., religious, priestly, lay), (4) the call to be a Catholic theologian, and (5) the more specific call to be a Catholic moral theologian. For our present purposes, we can say that the call to be a Catholic moral theologian is even further specified by a call to carry out one's research within the parameters of a particular school of Catholic moral thought (in our case, the Alphonsian tradition). It can also be further specified by one's dedication to particular subdiscipline of moral theology (fundamental moral, sexual morality, social ethics, bioethics).

To put it another way, it is of tantamount importance for a Catholic moral theologian to be a believing Catholic committed to a particular state of life within the Church and dedicated to uncovering the ethical dimensions of what it means to lead a life of *fides quaerens intellectum* (“faith seeking understanding”). Each of these prior callings, moreover, has something to contribute to the vocation of the Catholic moral theologian. Moral theologians do not work in a vacuum. Their following of Christ, their Catholic identity, their vocational commitments, their knowledge of the Catholic tradition, the particular school of thought they follow, shape the way they view the world, confront pressing moral issues of the day, give rise to the very questions they ask, and condition the way they respond to them. The Catholic moral theologian, in other words, carries out his or her task as both a member of and a servant to the community of believers. This task requires a vital, living faith in the God of Jesus Christ, one that ponders the radical difference between the culture of life and the culture of death and seeks to make rational sense out of the ethical choices facing today’s believers.

Above all else, the Catholic moral theologian is called to use his or her study, teaching, writing, action, and prayer as a means of dedicated, loving service. Scripture itself attests, “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1st Jn 4:16). These words from the First Letter of John open Pope Benedict’s first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est*, and remind us that, regardless of one’s state and circumstances, the Christian vocation is primarily about God’s love for humanity and the call to live in that love⁴.

2. Some Insights from *Deus caritas est*

One of Benedict’s distinctive insights in his encyclical letter is the way he grounds *eros* (or passionate, ascending love) and *agape* (or disinterested, descending love) in the mystery of divine love. In his

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 1.

mind, the two can never be completely separated: the need to give is complemented by the need to receive; “gift love” and “need love” are two sides of the same coin. The Fathers of the Church, he says, often employ the image of Jacob’s ladder from the Book of Genesis (*Gn* 28:12) to describe how the passionate, ascending love of *eros* is intimately related to the disinterested, descending love of *agape*⁵. “Fundamentally,” he says, “‘love’ is a single reality, but with different dimensions; at different times, one or other dimension may emerge more clearly”⁶.

I believe that Benedict’s insight into the mystery of love has much to teach us about the vocation of the Catholic moral theologian. This noble calling is a response to the call to love, but to love in a very special way. The vocation of a Catholic moral theologian is not only a call within a call, within a call, within a call, within a call, but also one that expresses itself through *eros* and *agape*, that is to say, through ascending and descending love, through passionate attraction and holy, disinterested service. At one point or another (and the sooner the better), we Catholic moral theologians need to get in touch with the passion that moves us. Why are we studying moral theology? What are the issues that we truly care about? What motivates us? What gets us excited? What moves us to study? What moves us to write? What moves us to discuss? What moves us to pray? What moves us to action? As Catholic moral theologians, we are responding to a special call from God. We need to ask ourselves how hard are we listening to it. How hard are we responding to it? Being a Catholic moral theologian demands having a passion for our craft. It asks us to be passionate about what we do, about our study, our research, our teaching, our seminars, our writing. This passion for our craft should lead us into asking hard questions about the nature of human action in all spheres of life. It should propel us to seek solutions to the pressing moral issues of the day that preserve the dignity of the human person, protect the common good, and promote the cause of social

⁵ *Ibid.*, no. 7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, no. 8.

justice. It should move us to devote ourselves to lives of service to Church and society on all their various levels.

To my mind, Pope Benedict's description of the close interconnection of *eros* and *agape* in the mystery of Christian love has something to teach us about Catholic moral theology itself and how it should be carried out at the Alphonsian Academy. If you bear with me for a few moments, I would like to develop this thought by first referring to one of the "old masters" of the Alphonsian Academy, the late Father Sean O'Riordan C.Ss.R. (1916-1998).

In 1995, Prof. O'Riordan delivered a lecture in this very auditorium entitled, "The Role of the Moral Theologian in the Alphonsian Academy"⁷. In it, he reflects on his experience of almost 30 years of teaching moral theology in these hallowed halls. At one point, he provides a brief summary of the Academy's role in the development of moral theology in the years leading up to the Second Vatican Council. He describes the Academy as playing a formative role in the transition from the manualist approach to moral theology to one representative of the "theology of the Council". During this period, its main contribution to the renewal of moral theology was its interdisciplinary approach that emphasized praxis over abstract theory. St. Alphonsus wanted all of moral theology to be ordered toward praxis, what O'Riordan calls "the authentic living in practice of the Christian life" by focusing on "the realization of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the concrete reality of life, to the way actual human beings think, decide, and commit themselves"⁸. This strong emphasis on praxis, coupled with a sense of moral theology's interdisciplinary nature and close connection to the spiritual life of the believer, has been one of the Academy's enduring strengths and remains so to this day.

Let us now return to Benedict XVI's depiction of the relationship between *eros* and *agape*. To my mind, this insight sheds light on the

⁷ SEAN O'RIORDAN, "Il teologo moralista nell'Accademia Alfonsiana," *StMor* 33 (1995) 45-56. For other discussions of the vocation of the moral theologian, see BASILIO PETRÀ, "Le sfide del teologo moralista oggi," *StMor* 33 (1995) 5-20; SABATINO MAJORANO, "Il teologo moralista oggi," *StMor* 33 (1995) 21-44.

⁸ SEAN O'RIORDAN, "Il teologo moralista nell'Accademia Alfonsiana", 46.

meaning of authentic Christian praxis. The focus on “the authentic living in practice of the Christian life” has everything in the world to do with love of God and neighbor. Benedict’s important insight is that such love is, by its very nature, both ascending and descending, both passionate and dispassionate, both need and gift-oriented. The close connection between *eros* and *agape* in the mystery of God’s love tells us a great deal about how that love should be manifested concretely in the lives of Jesus’ followers. For one thing, it tells us that our lives of service must flow from our passionate love for God and humanity. Our giving of ourselves to others must be rooted in a profound spirituality of the heart that finds its motivation only in seeking God’s will. On this point, Alphonsus’s teaching matches very closely that of Pope Benedict, the reason probably being because each has a deep regard for the importance of prayer in nurturing one’s personal relationship with God⁹. To be sure, Alphonsus’s “spirituality of the heart” has everything to do with his concern for prayer and moral praxis. For him, the two are like two sides of the same coin. His great spiritual and moral classic, *The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ* is a case in point. This book is a veritable handbook for how *eros* and *agape* come together in the daily life of the believer. It is a book concerned not just with the love of God (*eros*) but also with living out that love in a life of prayerful service (*agape*). It is a book about the close relationship between spirituality and morality, between prayer and action, about how a profound “spirituality of heart” can be dutifully transformed into a genuine “spirituality of practice”¹⁰.

In his book, *The Holy Longing*, Ronald Rolheiser, one of the pre-eminent spiritual authors of our day, describes spirituality as how we channel our *eros* what we do with the fire burning within us¹¹.

⁹ See, for example, BENEDICT XVI, *Deus caritas est*, no. 37; ALPHONSUS DE LIGUORI, *Del gran mezzo della preghiera*, Opere ascetiche, vol. 2, Edizioni di storia e letteratura, Roma 1962, 7-9.

¹⁰ See DENNIS J. BILLY, *Plentiful Redemption: An Introduction to Alphonsian Spirituality*, Liguori Publications, Liguori 2001, 130-43.

¹¹ RONALD ROLHEISER, *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality*, Doubleday, New York 1999, 7, 11.

Alphonsus did many things with the passion within him. He founded a missionary congregation; he moved the hearts of simple country folk through his mission sermons; he composed hymns and heartfelt poetry; he painted portraits; he wrote over 110 books and pamphlets, not the least of which were those devoted to moral theology; he wrote countless letters; and he spent hours on end in the throes of deep personal prayer. He lived his life with the single purpose of doing God's will. For him, that meant doing as much as possible to lead people closer to deep intimate relationship with God. Alphonsus's work in moral theology was just one of many expressions of his deep passion and love for God. He wrote his moral textbooks in order to help people find practical ways to experience the depths of God's love for them and to respond accordingly. His moral writing is but one facet of a life entirely given over and converted to God.

At the beginning of this academic year, it is important for us to remember what motivated Alphonsus, why he did what he did and wrote what he wrote. It is important for us to remember that moral theology must be a critical reflection on Christian life and needs to be understood as a broad, interdisciplinary discipline that meets people where they are and deals with the issues and problems closest to them.

Conclusion

What does it mean to be a Catholic moral theologian, and, more precisely, one formed in the Alphonsian tradition? As I said in my opening remarks, there is no single answer to this question. The complexity of the moral issues facing the Church requires today's moral theologians to have a creative imagination that employs a critical assessment of Church's moral teaching as it seeks to build a "culture of life" through the promotion of the dignity of the person, the common good, and human solidarity.

In his own day, Alphonsus used his thorough knowledge of the Church's tradition to find creative solutions to the theological im-

passee in which the opposing probabalist and probabiliorist schools of moral casuistry had become inextricably mired. He was also humble enough to recognize the need to change in his own theological position as he gradually moved from the probabiliorist position, to the probabalist, and then to his own nuanced equiprobabilist stance¹².

Those who follow in Alphonsus's footsteps need to embrace the same kind of creativity and humility before the truth as they face the practical spiritual and moral issues of today's believing community.

I also think it is very important to remember that, in addition to being the patron saint of confessors and moral theologians, Alphonsus is also known as "*Doctor Zelantissimus*" ("Most Zealous Doctor"), as well as the "Doctor of Prayer." Prayer and the spiritual life are what enkindled in him and sustained his deep passion for God. They are what propelled him forward in his life of service to the Church, to the Congregation he founded, and to the poor and most abandoned. They are what enabled him to see that spirituality and morality, prayer and praxis, yes, even *eros* and *agape* were intimately related. Everything in Alphonsus flows from his deep passion for God. Catholic moral theologians today can look at their patron saint and see in him a model of what it means to love God and neighbor and how to live the call to Catholic moral theology, this "call, within a call, within a call", with professional acumen and holy passion. This is an important (if sometimes forgotten) part of the legacy that Alphonsus has left to the Church. Catholic moral theologians, especially those teaching and studying here at the Alphonsian Academy, would do well to ponder it and keep it close to their hearts.

¹² See THÉODULE REY-MERMET, *La morale selon Saint Alphonse de Liguori*, 73-81; MARCIANO VIDAL, *La morale de Sant'Alfonso: Dal rigorismo alla benignità*, Editiones Academiae Alfonsianae, Roma 1992, 264-272.

SUMMARIES

What does it mean to be a Catholic moral theologian, and, more precisely, one formed in the Alphonsian tradition? There is no single answer to this question. The complexity of the moral issues facing the Church requires today's moral theologians to have a creative imagination that employs a critical assessment of the Church's moral teaching as it seeks to build a "culture of life" through the promotion of the dignity of the person, the common good, and human solidarity. Those who follow in Alphonsus's footsteps need to embrace the same kind of creativity and humility before the truth as they face the practical spiritual and moral issues of today's believing community.

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¿Qué significa ser teólogo católico de la moral y, más exactamente, teólogo formado en la tradición alfonsiana? No existe una única respuesta a esta pregunta. La complejidad de cuestiones morales que afronta la Iglesia en la actualidad, exige que los teólogos de la moral posean una imaginación creativa que les permita valorar críticamente la enseñanza moral de la Iglesia, la cual busca construir "la cultura de la vida" por medio de la promoción de la dignidad de la persona, el bien común y la solidaridad humana. Quienes siguen las huellas de Alfonso, deben adoptar la misma creatividad y humildad frente a la verdad, a medida que afrontan los asuntos prácticos de índole espiritual y moral de los actuales creyentes.

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Cosa significa essere un teologo moralista cattolico, e più precisamente, un teologo formato nella tradizione Alfonsiana? Non c'è una sola risposta a questa domanda. La complessità dei temi morali che affronta la Chiesa richiede che i teologi moralisti di oggi abbiano un'immaginazione creativa che impieghi una valutazione comprensiva dell'insegnamento della morale della Chiesa che cerca di costruire "la cultura della vita" attraverso la promozione della dignità della persona, il bene comune e la solidarietà umana. Coloro che seguono le orme di Alfonso devono abbracciare lo stesso genere di creatività ed umiltà di fronte alla verità man mano che essi affrontano i temi pratici spirituali e morali della comunità dei credenti di oggi.