Introduction

> While distrustful souls see nothing but darkness falling upon the face of the earth, we prefer to restate our confidence in our Savior, who has not left the world he redeemed.
>
> St. John XXIII, *Humanae salutis* no. 4

On December 25, 1961, John XXIII solemnly convoked the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council by promulgating the Apostolic Constitution, *Humanae salutis* (Of Human Salvation). In this document, the Pope calls attention to "a crisis happening within society."[1] It is, in several important respects, an ethical crisis, in response to which the Church is to discern "the signs of the times" with a view toward elucidating Christian hope to a world that has grown forlorn in the face of so much despair.[2] Fifty years after the conclusion of the council, therefore, it is worth reexamining the ethical dimensions of the crisis itself as well as responses to it, which have both emerged from, and contributed to, the development of the Catholic moral tradition in the post-conciliar period. The purpose of this introduction is to situate the chapters of this book in the context of the aforementioned task.

This introduction unfolds over four sections. The first section attempts to provide a general definition of the crisis of contemporary ethics as understood from the standpoint of the Catholic moral tradition. The next section examines key features of the Catholic response to this crisis. The third section draws from the preceding sections in order to explicate the preliminary goals and governing objectives of this book and to explain the correlation between them and its respective chapters. The final section clarifies the relationship of the structure of this book to the aforesaid goals and objectives.

[1] *HS* no. 2.
[2] *HS* no. 4; the "signs of the times" reference is to Matthew 16:4.

THE CRISIS

The term "crisis" refers to an unstable or dangerous state of affairs. So understood, the crisis of contemporary ethics is the result of the convergence of three distinct influences: postmodernism, liberalism, and secularism.[3] This section examines the manner in which these forces have helped bring about the universe of howling moral confusion in which we currently find ourselves. At bottom, ethics is concerned with the following three questions: What is true? What is good? And who is my neighbor? Postmodernism problematizes the first question, liberalism the second, and secularism the third. I begin with postmodernism.

The French literary theorist and philosopher, Jean-François Lyotard, understood postmodernism as demolishing the assumption that reason can arrive at truths beyond one's own making.[4] Absent such truths, humanity is left only with rival narratives from which we derive meaning. Now, if there is no truth, then, as John Paul II stated, "all positions are equally valid."[5] Do you see the problem? Suppose that one day a very good friend of yours suddenly and inexplicably began to treat you as his or her worst enemy and you had no idea why. The first thing you would do is search your memory for an explanation. If that failed, then you'd likely start asking your mutual friends if they knew why this was happening. One friend tells you not to worry, that it has nothing to do with you or anything you did. However, another friend tells you that the original friend is indeed very upset with something you did, but he or she won't say what. The problem is that each of those positions cannot simultaneously be true. Either you did something to upset your friend or you did not. The fact that your other friends have rival points of view on the matter is quite beside the point. You just want to know the truth so you can set things right with your friend.

Another problem with postmodernism is that is creates a "lack of confidence in truth."[6] If all of your friends offer you different explanations of why your other friend has abruptly turned on you, then you'll come to distrust all of them. Even if one of their explanations is the right one, it will be drowned out in the conflicting sea of opinions. I have used a

[3] See Nicanor Pier Giorgio Austriaco, O.P., *Biomedicine and Beatitude: An Introduction to Catholic Bioethics* (Washington, DC: CUA Press, 2011), 247–76.
[4] See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
[5] *FR* no. 5.
[6] *FR* no. 5.

simple example, but something like this has been taking place with respect to ethical questions for quite some time and on a much larger scale. Ultimately, a true worldview is a prerequisite for an authentic morality. Yet, people today seem resigned to give up the quest for truth, accepting as true the disappointing claim that there is no truth. This leaves us forlorn. As Augustine cautioned, the denial of the possibility of truth causes us to give up on the diligent search for truth and even to "turn away from the desire for searching."[7] Thus, the epistemological crisis of the present age: it is no use asking "what is true?" in a world without truth.

The second factor contributing to the present crisis of ethics is liberalism. By "liberalism," I mean an understanding of freedom divorced from the pursuit of moral goodness.[8] According to this view, moral goodness is reduced to what a given society, or even a given individual, happens to find worthwhile and admirable. Freedom, then, is reduced to the uninterrupted pursuit of that which one finds pleasing. The problem is that this conception of freedom is false; it is the freedom of a man lost in the wilderness without a compass. He is free to go in whatever direction he pleases, but he would much prefer the freedom to find his way home. We all know what it is like to think that something is good only to find out later that we were deceived. Thus, we try to discern between that which is really good and that which is only apparently good, but liberalism paralyzes this discernment. It reduces moral goodness to a private opinion and leaves us in a state of wandering. We lack confidence as to whether moral goodness exists and, even if it does, whether it is attainable.

Finally, contemporary society is secular; faith is regarded as a kind of private sentimentality that one is to keep to oneself.[9] It does not have a constructive role to play with respect to informing social and political life. Whereas liberalism was supposed to give us greater freedom, secularism was supposed to be a unifying force. The idea was that traditional religious worldviews are divisive and lead only to conflict.[10] The authors of secularism, therefore, thought that we ought to construct a society built solely on secular foundations. By leaving our faith out of our public lives, we would get along better as a society and be able to recognize a wider scope of human dignity. In a world without God, we would gain a greater appreciation of our neighbor. At the same time secularism was

[7] *CA* 2.1.1.9–14.
[8] See Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *The Sources of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1995), 327–78.
[9] See Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[10] See William Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

promoting unity and dignity, however, it was seeking to diminish the relation between creature and Creator, which is the very source of unity and dignity. Consequently, the neighbor is reduced to the status of a thing that may be used "as if it had no relation to its Creator."[11]

In sum, the crisis of contemporary ethics is not the result of a particular set of responses to questions of the true, the good, and the neighbor. Rather, the crisis of contemporary ethics is born from the obliteration of the conditions needed to even engage the questions in a manner that does not presuppose that one may never move beyond the arbitrary whims and caprices of the person asking them. This crisis was already well underway when John XXIII evoked the Second Vatican Council. Subsequent decades have witnessed the worsening of the crisis as the assumptions of postmodernism, liberalism, and secularism have become more firmly embedded. This is not without irony, for the brave new world has broken all of its promises. The claim that there are no ultimate truths has itself become an ultimate truth, an infallible dogma. Liberalism's elevation of freedom of conscience has come to negate that very freedom. Finally, the world's emancipation from God has exacerbated the systematic violations of human dignity that define the present age. The universal dignity that was supposed to follow the eclipse of belief turned out to be reserved for the engineers of the new society and their disciples. Such are the factors that make up the ethical crisis of our times.

THE RESPONSE

Having analyzed the crisis of contemporary ethics, we may now consider the Catholic response to it. In response to postmodernism and liberalism, Catholic ethics reminds us that it is natural for "the human mind to look for and to love what is true and good."[12] In response to secularism, Catholic ethics reiterates that "human dignity rests above all on the fact that humanity is called to communion with God."[13] This enjoins us "to make ourselves the neighbor of every individual," and our neighbor is to be regarded not as a means to some selfish end, but "as another self."[14] Most of all, the Catholic response to the crisis of contemporary ethics is to proclaim Christ; for it is Christ who "fully reveals humanity to itself

[11] *GS* no. 26.
[12] *GS* no. 15.
[13] *GS* no. 19.
[14] *GS* no. 27.

and brings to light its very high calling."[15] This statement is integral to the development of the Catholic moral tradition in the post-conciliar period.[16]

While the current work presents the Catholic moral tradition in the post-conciliar period as developing in response to the crisis detailed earlier and seeks to show the distinctiveness of this tradition by contrasting it with alternative ethical outlooks and approaches, this method is not to demean what is true and good in other systems of ethics, nor is it to embrace a fortress mentality, which regards Catholic ethics as necessarily and perpetually at war with rival traditions. Nor is it to suggest that the Church is somehow quarantined from modern society and therefore not susceptible to the same challenges. To the contrary, the Church is in the world, and the world is in the Church. The crisis of the modern age is one facing all of humanity. The role of the Church in the modern world is to address our common problems in the way that only the Church can, by "throwing the light of the Gospel on them and supplying humanity with the saving resources which the Church has received from its founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit."[17] Keeping these things in mind, we are now in a position to summarize the preliminary goals and governing objectives of this book.

THE GOALS OF THIS BOOK

As stated earlier, the intention of this introduction is to position the chapters of this book in the context of the crisis of contemporary ethics and Catholic responses to it, which have both arisen from, and added to, the development of the Catholic moral tradition in the post-conciliar period. That being said, this book has four preliminary goals and three governing objectives. I begin with the former.

In conducting the research for this project, I routinely encountered four major areas of fecundity within the discipline of Catholic moral theology in the post-conciliar period. These areas make up the four parts of this book – foundations, virtue, Catholic social teaching, and bioethics.

[15] *GS* no. 22.

[16] Although the primary focus of this book is on the development of the Catholic moral tradition since the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, this does not mean that the accumulation of history leading up to, informing, and contextualizing the Council is neglected. Instead, I use the method historians refer to as "arc" in order to connect contemporary issues to the thought of previous ages, allowing, as it were, for the chronology to be uneven for the sake of systematic presentation and clarity. In this way, we are able to arrive at a greater coherence than pure history allows without resorting to mere historiography.

[17] *GS* no. 3.

Obviously, these four domains are interrelated in important ways, but they also remain distinct. Indeed, there is a tendency on the part of Catholic moral theologians to allow one of the four areas to crowd out the other three, like a great oak tree in a forest of shrubs. I myself am not immune to this tendency. However, I have tried my best to treat all four domains as mutually illuminating, like four apple trees cross-pollinating each other and bearing more fruit as a result. At any rate, these four major areas inform the four preliminary goals pursued in these pages.

The first preliminary goal of this book is to make clear how the Catholic moral tradition understands the possession and pursuit of ethical truths. The chapters of Part I are ordered to this goal; in them, we treat what moral theologians and ethicists alike refer to as the "foundations problem." That is, whatever we say about right and wrong, fair and unfair, good and bad must be grounded in something. When sixth graders challenge the rule that says, "Gum may not be chewed in class," they are, without knowing it, coming up against the foundations problem. The teacher generally replies with an appeal to authority, "Because I said so," the legitimacy of which the students rightly question. Surely the arbitrary judgments of Ms. Smith do not form the bedrock for all ethics and morals. So then what does? Is there a universal law accessible to all rational agents that makes clear both that it is wrong to chew gum in class and also why it is so? Or is not chewing gum in class just a cultural convention, like wearing your hat backwards? Or is the mere appeal to power, "Because I said so," a sufficient foundation for moral norms? This in a nutshell is the foundations problem. Chapter 1 investigates five possible foundations for morality: historicism, cultural relativism, emotivism, social contract theory, and utilitarianism. I argue that these potential foundations for moral judgments turn out to be different variants of moral relativism. Chapter 2 examines the Catholic response to the foundations question, which involves the coming together of human reason and divine revelation. Chapter 3 draws from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's classic novel, *A River Between*, to form a "test case" for the fundamental claims of Part I.

The second preliminary goal of this book is to demonstrate how the Catholic moral tradition understands the good of the individual. Thus, the chapters of Part II treat virtue in its classical form as well as issues arising from the resurgence of virtue ethics in the decades since Vatican II. Several factors account for this resurgence, such as the priority virtue ethics gives to the formation of character and the attainment of true happiness, which surprisingly can be easily put to the side, forgotten, neglected,

or even vilified in several forms of modern ethics. The key to Catholic virtue ethics is the claim that morality is ultimately about more than duty and obligation. It is about the fulfillment of our deepest desire as human beings to live in friendship with God. Virtues are names for the good habits that accompany this kind of friendship. Another way of saying the same thing is that virtue is about living the good life, a life, that is, in which true happiness is achieved. In Chapter 4, we analyze the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Chapter 5 explores the virtues that come from grace. These include the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, as well as graced versions of the cardinal virtues. Chapter 6 treats an essential belief supported by ancient and medieval virtue ethicists, the unity thesis, which holds that one must possess all of the virtues to possess even one of them. Here we consider more fully what it means to possess a virtue and to progress in the good life.

The third preliminary goal of this book is to elucidate how the Catholic moral tradition understands the good of society. Accordingly, the chapters of Part III introduce, investigate, and analyze the social doctrines of the Catholic Church. U.S. bishops have not infrequently lamented the fact that several Catholics remain uninformed regarding these important doctrines. However, Catholic social teaching is not relevant only to Catholics, rather it has to do with the overall course of humanity and is firmly grounded in scriptural themes of justice. These themes are examined in Chapter 7. The principles of Catholic social teaching, particularly as presented in the Pastoral Constitution of the Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes*, form the subject matter for Chapter 8. The Catholic just war tradition is examined and assessed in Chapter 9. These chapters make clear the relevance of Catholic social teaching for the modern world.

The fourth and final preliminary goal of this book is to gain an appreciation of the Catholic moral tradition's commitment to the principle of universal human dignity and the implications of this commitment as it pertains to bioethics. Therefore, the chapters of Part IV focus on a select set of issues having to do with bioethical decisions pertaining respectively to the beginning and end of life. Chapter 10 builds on previous chapters in order to make clear the Catholic commitment to the principle of universal human dignity. This chapter includes an examination of the "capacities approach" and the human person/human nonperson distinction. Chapter 11 treats beginning of life decisions: contraception, abortion, and commercial surrogacy, or "contract pregnancy" as feminist ethicist Debra Satz calls it. Chapter 12 addresses the issue of euthanasia from the standpoint of a theology of providence. We examine ordinary kinds of

euthanasia as well as the emerging "peaceful exit pill." The goal of these chapters is to make clear what the Catholic teaching holds with respect to select bioethical issues as well as to examine the link between these teachings and the essence of human dignity as understood from within the Catholic moral tradition.

The four preliminary goals of this book are ordered to the following governing objectives:

1. This book provides a comprehensive introduction to the Catholic moral tradition.
2. This book enables the reader to make preliminary observations regarding the interconnection of the four principle areas of Catholic moral theology in the post-conciliar period.
3. This book seeks to uncover the essence of Catholic ethics, its animating spirit.

This book, as a whole, is ordered to these objectives. Any other aims I may have had in writing it would come under the scope of these. To analyze the development of the Catholic moral tradition in the post-conciliar period is to analyze the Catholic response to the contemporary crisis of ethics detailed earlier. In response to postmodernism's leveling of truth claims, Catholic ethics offers natural law perfected by revelation. In response to liberalism's exaltation of freedom of indifference, Catholic ethics offers the freedom for excellence afforded by growth in the virtues. In response to secularism's assumption of selective human dignity, Catholic ethics offers a principle of universal human dignity rooted in the interpersonal communion of creature and Creator. It is this communion that also informs the principles of Catholic social teaching and the account of justice in which those principles are grounded. Above all, the Church proclaims Christ.

THE STRUCTURE OF THIS BOOK

Before concluding, I should like to make one further clarification regarding the structure of this book. As stated prior, this fourfold structure is intrinsically linked to the previously referenced goals. However, my ordering is chiefly for pedagogical reasons; it is not meant to suggest that the Catholic moral tradition begins ethical analysis with uncritical acceptance of the starting points for debate that are standard in ethical discourse since the Enlightenment. Rather, Catholic ethics begins with the encounter between God and the human person. With that being said, I wish to

make clear that I have attempted to arrange the material such that as we progress through the text we draw nearer to the larger objectives by which this book is governed. Thus, as you move through these chapters, it would be wise not to lose sight of a few overarching questions: To what is the Catholic moral tradition ultimately ordered? To what end does it exist? By what means is it sustained and renewed?