

# Ethical Imagination in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Giants of the Past Speaking to the Future

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## Introduction:

- Image of Funeral of JP II: all nations of world gathered together;
- Pentecost Sunday: the Holy Spirit speaking in many languages;
- My own almost 40 years of “Doing Moral Theology”; time for “Ethical Imagination”:  
“What if?” Also, in keeping with Benedict XVI; Looking back at a few “ethical giants”  
of 20<sup>th</sup> C.: K. Rahner, B. Lonergan, J. Mahoney, K. Kirk, J. Fuchs, B. Häring, JP II;
- How can we make the ethical message of our Catholic faith truly “Good News” in the 21<sup>st</sup> c.?
- All this workshop asks is : “What if...?”

## A. Principle Postulates of Modernity, from which we are emerging into “Post-Modernity”:

1. The belief in *unlimited progress*:
  - progress, over everything else, must be pursued in every sphere of life;
  - if there is no progress, or at least signs of potential progress, then there is something wrong which must be addressed and corrected;
  - we must always improve over what was accomplished in the past;
2. The belief in the *exclusive supremacy of reason*:
  - we must only rely on the human faculty of objective reasoning;
  - all other forms of “knowing” are believed to be “subjective”, “illusory”, or “unreliable” (e.g. intuition, affectivity, imagination, belief, etc.);
  - objective, empirical, scientific knowledge is considered the only sure guarantee to assure the continuing progress of civilization;
3. The belief in the *supreme autonomy of the individual*:
  - the autonomous individual, with his or her inner resources and free will, is alone capable of self-development and self-fulfillment;
  - the individual is regarded as basic “atomic” unity in society, and not in its *radical reciprocity* with others (as an interpersonal “subject”);
4. The belief in the ever-increasing *domination and control of nature* by human beings:
  - nature is perceived as being completely subordinated to and at the service of people;
  - nature must be subdued at all costs and enlisted at the service of greater economic and industrial development;
5. *Success and efficiency* are the two principle criteria for testing the true worth of any human endeavour, whether individual or collective;
  - “Pragmatism” is the preferred ideology of modernism;
  - Standardization and increased uniformity are seen as the most efficient way to insure productivity and economic development;

– to use a scholastic term, a “*bonum utile*” always takes precedence over a “*bonum honestum*”;

**B. Signs or “Fore-Runners” of Post-Modernity: (Richard Côté, O.M.I.)**

1. The manifest desire for a *new spirituality* which connects with people’s lived experience.
2. The return of a certain *mysticism*. (A move from pedagogy to mystagogy.)
3. The *sacred* perceived as “diffuse” more than a “solid”.
4. The rehabilitation of the *imagination*. (The imagination captures faith.)
5. A pronounced desire to have an experience of God with *few mediations*.
6. *Freedom from all dualism*.
7. The acceptance of one’s own *vulnerability*. (Includes growth in capacity to receive)
8. A vision that is more and more *globalizing and holistic*.
9. *Creativity* as a prerogative (or right) of everyone.
10. The gift of finding *interconnectedness* where we still have difficulty in perceiving them.
11. A much greater *tolerance of ambiguity*.
12. The serenity of being able to follow *personal conscience* without a sense of guilt.
13. A greater capacity to receive the vibrations of *feminine consciousness*.
14. A much greater opening to the *symbolic*.

**C. Grounding our Imagination in the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Truth:**

1. “I still have many things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now. When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth, for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come. He will glorify me, because he will take what is mine and declare it to you.” (*John 16: 13-14*)
  - “Spirit of truth”: usually think of Spirit in terms of consolation, guidance, urging, exhortation, joyful outbursts, even healing, etc.
  - Truth: Gk: *Eleutheria*: to take away the veil; to see the “right order” in creation
  - Truth: involves right reason, not just sentimentalism or opinion;
  - Truth: also involves various modes of knowing such as revelation, reason, logic, intuition, revelation, discovery, experience.
2. A world of denial: “fuzzification” of the truth today, especially in areas of sexuality;
3. A need to take on the role of someone rowing a boat: look to rear but move forward;
4. The Spirit of Creative Imagination in the light of the fundamental truths of our faith:
  - a. Creation
  - b. Sin
  - c. Redemption
  - d. Salvation

## D. Five optics of Ethical Imagination for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:

### 1. The drive for Totality:

- John Mahoney, S.J., Joseph Fuchs, S.J., and B. Häring, C.Ss.R.:
  - Morality of natural law: too abstract and inadequate;
  - need more Christocentric approach: response to call of Christ; more broad;
  - uses Rahner: morality of non-Christians + supernatural existential
  - governing piece of moral theology = the *faith* through which Christ is revealed
  - Mth: – needs to overcome separation from Dogmatic and Spiritual Theology
    - also to perfection of consciences under personal influence of H. Sp.
  - need more scientific exposition of Mth. Vs. Sentiment or moralizing or just studying cases;
  - Mth = “a Byzantine discussion as best way of evading prescriptions of the Church while staying on the right side of the law.” (J. Mahoney)
- moral issues of today: sexual & medical ethics; global ethics: modern warfare, nuclear war, world poverty, earth’s resources, AIDS, social justice.
- totality: from pigeon-holing moral issues into objective/subjective, natural/supernat.
  - To see context: parts within the whole:
    - E.g. speech: – complexities of telling the truth
    - procreation: – physical body → person → relationships  
e.g. sterilization; sperm tests; Marriage of divorced persons;
  - Pius XI: Totality : “*corpus*” to “person” and “charity/solidarity” (Pius XII & JP II), re. Sterilization and kidney transplants;
  - can we discover a “morality from inside a more relational whole”?
- totality: JP II’s “Hierarchy of moral values” (contraception and abortion) to a “Hierarchy of Urgencies” (J.M. Aubert): e.g. recognizing the two-in-one flesh  
In marriage, the necessity of raising a family and family planning; relational oneness of partners; “reality is essentially relational”;
- totality:
  - person → marriage → other churches → humanity;
  - interrelatedness of parts: divine *ordo* of Augustine and Aquinas

### 2. The Recognition of Diversity:

- diversity is viewing the whole/totality in a diversity of different ways:
  - via different languages than Latin;
    - via different distinctions: – “good” thing to do ?  
– “right” thing to do ?
    - via more nuanced words: “intrinsic evil” : *malum, malitiae* only?  
Always = to “exceptional cruelty”, “malicious behaviour”?
    - can we exploit more native English idioms as we try to do in translating biblical and liturgical texts?
  - via diversity of human and moral experiences?

- Eskimos' many words for "snow"
- struggle with western vocabulary: "marriage", "ownership", "communication", "person", "personhood";
- via phenomenon of change:
  - "In a higher world it is otherwise; but here below to live is to change, and to be perfect is to have changed often." (Cardinal Newman)
  - Teilhard de Chardin: theology of change: purpose & development
  - "Development of Doctrine" (Newman) in a "pilgrim church"
  - E.g. biblical studies; salvation of believers outside RC church; Ecumenism; matter & form of Orders; moral possibility of B.C. using responsible family planning, NFP; liturgy; also in morality: slavery; freedom of conscience; capital punishment;
  - changeable vs. unchangeable (Rahner)
  - needs fresh mediation on word of God in light of contemporary exper.
  - careful not to make "pastoral theology" into "exceptionalism" of Moral theology principles = "loophole" moral theology;
- via fresh ways of viewing conflict situations:
  - often handled under "Lesser of two evils", "choose best in circumstances", "compromise", "proportionality", "situated/limited freedom";
  - can we reappraise objective/subjective morality in terms of diversity of individuals and their distinct moral universe through development of concept of *invincible ignorance* = inchoate attempt to acknowledge objective diversity in lives of individuals; (e.g. family planning and value of conjugal love in marriage; AIDS and condom use;)
  - Can what diverse individuals consider to be what God expects of them actually be objectively what God expects of them?
- via moral pluralism in Liberation Theology:
  - co-existence of theologies of life, values related to poverty and social injustice; some measure of truth in all of them?
  - expand on Thomism to more Augustinianism, etc.? (Rahner and Von Balthasar?) (Existentialism and personalism...?)
  - with freedom of discussion in appropriate venues?
  - using both inductive and deductive methods;
  - orthodoxy to orthopraxis to choosing one's prejudices (e.g. preferential option for the poor)
  - move from static "hierarchy of values" to "hierarchy/urgency of priorities" to give moral coloration to everything one does...
  - prefer a "totality of relationships" over "individual totality"
  - open up deeper sense of "natural law" (still almost seen as "law of nature" instead of "rational participation in divine order" (Acq.)

### 3. Deepening our appreciation of human experience and our "instincts": Bernard Lonergan, Karl Rahner, Kenneth Kirk:

#### a. Bernard Lonergan (+1984) and experience:

- sees our lives caught up in the mystery of infinite love;
- rooted in Newman’s *Grammar of Assent*: “two thousand difficulties do not make a doubt”; = look difficulties square in the eye
- deep appreciation of the PROCESS OF HUMAN JUDGING:
  - from early dialogues of Plato and Augustine: he came to appreciate the ACT OF UNDERSTANDING: ask questions and answer them to promote understanding = a theory of the dynamics of the soul that made sense of experience;
  - so that Catholic theology could influence all of human cultures: art, literature, science, history, human sciences, even economic theory;
- core of his appeal: SELF-APPROPRIATION: a personal act of taking possession of one’s own consciousness = insight into insight = a personal act of commitment;
- often seen through “peak experiences”
  
- as Aquinas gave us a common language for 800 yrs, so need today for new common language: paradigm of Aquinas: took Aristotle, applied him to Arabic and Greek ideas penetrating whole Western world...
  
- Lonergan’s spirituality: a spirituality of the Word as it spreads out to all cultures = long term implications of Gospel; it always concerns question of god;
  
- his triad: EXPERIENCE / UNDERSTANDING / JUDGING  
(=subjective side of Aquinas: potency / form /act )
  
- when everyday dimensions of culture are changing, “what is needed is not a dam to block the stream but control of the river-bed through which the stream must flow;”
  
- L. provided a language that makes it possible for persons of faith to move forward through the welter of contemporary movements towards an understanding of themselves the universe and God; he and Newman could add to the list of Doctors;

**b. Karl Rahner and the “*instinctus fidei*”:**

- spoke of a moral “sense”, a moral “feel”, or “taste” for situations that is enjoyed by the Faithful, individually or in common, to which St. Paul and the Church’s magisterium have given regular recognition;
  - = theological equivalent of the “sentiment” of Robert Browning that “a person’s reach should exceed his/her grasp”;
  - = “moral intuitions” seeking reasons or grounds;
  - = “*instinctus fidei*” : the “Catholic nose”, “flair for the faith”, etc. in RC tradition;
    - similar to “*sensus fidelium*” and “*consensus fidelium*” (Vat. II, Lumen G., 12)
- some similarity with ethical theories of Intuitionism, with its strengths and weaknesses;
- also, must distinguish: legitimate insight with perhaps outdated culture or prejudice, or between reasoning and rationalization;
- also, cannot dispense with God-given power of reasoning and working with and communicating with shared medium of articulate and expressed arguments and counter-arguments;
  
- **Examples:**
  - kidney transplants => principle of charity / solidarity (JP II)
  - Vietnam war and napalm bombing
  - nuclear war and “surgical strikes”

- early induction of lethal fetal anomalies
- all adds up the “Y” factor in ethical discernment (“Yes” or “Yuk”)

**c. Kenneth Kirk (1886 - 1954)**

- use of “consensus fidelium” as a source of moral judgment:
  - valid source of determining what the faith is in our Christian tradition
  - early Fathers of the Church listened to what the *sensus fidelium* was: **“Let us seek the word of God in all things. Let us hang on the lips of the faithful since the Holy Spirit inspires them all.” ( Paulinus of Nola)**
  - excellent example: Newman: “On consulting the Laity (Faithful) in Matters of Doctrine”; also used in ascertaining the faith re. Assumption of BVM, 1954;
  - can be used in reformulating laws, human and divine, due to their human terms = consensus of humankind re. Virtues; English “common sense”;
  - affirmed role of *consensus fidelium* in affirming laws by the people; = receptivity of law, without making church into a democracy; can lead to individual situations where a law needs to be modified; (re. Marriage Laws and validity, etc.; Trent and Canonical Form for M.);
  - uses “Voice of Society”, “tuitions”, “intuitions”, custom, and even “Illative Sense” of Newman;
  - moral absolutes are beguiling, as is universality of any *consensus fidelium*;
  - we do have a few first principles of natural law known with absolute and unflinching certainty;
  - his writings have a dialectic between *a posteriori* empirical, pragmatic approach and his struggle with *a priori* oriented moral theology manuals
  - fusion of *ecclesia docens* / *ecclesia discens*, not seen as exclusive of each other
  - *Consensus fidelium* includes whole church, not just the laity or the hierarchy;
  - need a *consensus erga Deum!*

**4. Recovery of the Mystery of God:**

- this “earths” all theology and makes theological pluralism unavoidable;
  - seeking specificity of Christian ethics tends to be disinterested in this;
  - Christian morality is human morality because of the Incarnation;
- is there a clear and adequate distinction between reason and revelation? Nature/grace?
  - “All ethics are Christian ethics to some degree”. (Rahner)
  - “Every truth, no matter who utters it, has its origin in the Holy Spirit.” (Ambrosiaster)
- Christian/theological ethics: more Protestant: SS + individual doing rational, philosophical, social secular ethics;
- Moral theology: strongly connected to Magisterium’s articulations of truth:
  - Note: the primary task of moral theology is to explain that we are personally called in Christ by the personal God to be reconciled to the Father and to one another with the gifts of the Holy Spirit: plunged into mystery of Trinity’
- using: artistic media through which God fashions and crafts humans through the medium of their personal freedom;
- stuff/material of moral theology: sheer wonder of our being as it responds in freedom to the design of God;

- images of theology:
  - stained glass window
  - God refracted through a prism
- leading us to:
  - true humility;
  - reverence for God;
  - be aware of our ultimate aloneness w. God in sanctuary of our conscience
  - tune into the Spirit of Christ at work in creation and redemption
  - Christ at work in our hearts and in the Church as a primary and indispensable element of the new law;

**5. The Call of Truth and Beauty: Michael Prieur, *Panes of Glory, Illuminations from the Stained Glass Windows of St. Thomas Aquinas Chapel, St. Peter's Seminary, London, Ontario, London, Ontario, 2005.***

- outline of the book
- The Doctors of the Church:
  - Who they are; (see special list)
  - Criteria for a doctor of the church (Prospero Lambertini):
    - i. eminent teaching
    - ii. outstanding sanctity
    - iii. official declaration of this status by the church (pope or general council)
  - the doctors of the church in our seminary chapel
  - hallmarks of their lives:
    - i. Christ was totally at the centre of their lives;
    - ii. All loved Sacred Scripture; often depicted with book or scroll;
    - iii. Almost always manifested a deep love of Blessed Virgin Mary;
    - iv. Deep sense of obedience to legitimate church authority;
    - v. Worked with what insights they had at the time, not fearing to be wrong, trusting that the truth would ultimately prevail;
    - vi. Often did their most productive work when being persecuted, in exile, or following such experiences.

– possible new doctors:

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| – St. Gregory of Nyssa (335-c.395)           | – Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179)                   |
| – St. Maximus the Confessor (c. 580-662)     | – Gertrude the Great (1256 - 1301)                  |
| – St. Symeon the New Theologian (949 - 1022) | – Julian of Norwich (1342 - c, 1416)                |
| – St. Gregory Palamas (1296-1359)            | – St. Catherine of Genoa (1447 - 1510)              |
| – Isaac of Nineveh (d. 700)                  | – St. Teresa Benedicta (Edith Stein)<br>(1891-1942) |
| – St. Gregory the Illuminator (d.332)        | – John Cassian (360- 435)                           |
| – St. Isaac the Great (d. 440)               | – Ancius Boethius (c. 480 - 524)                    |
| – St. Shenoute (d. 466)                      | – St. Thomas More (1478 - 1535)                     |
| – Aelred of Rievaulx (1110 - 1167)           | – John Henry Newman (1801- 1890)                    |
| – Bernardino of Siena (1380 - 1444)          | – John Paul II (1920 - 2005)                        |
| – Hugh of St. Victor (1090 - 1142)           | – Bernard Lonergan                                  |
| – St. Louis Marie de Montfort (1673-1716)    |   |

**E. Catholic Moral Living and Ethics in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century:**

### **What if...?**

1. ...we always saw the implications of the “big picture” along with “my picture”?
2. ...we wanted to do what was true and not just convenient or self-serving to me?
3. ...we listened to the deepest values of all cultures and not just to our own?
4. ...we stopped, looked and listened to our hearts to examine its “movements” every day?
5. ...we could see the personal struggle in people’s hearts before we imposed any laws?
6. ...we sought out the truth in the beauty and art of our own tradition, past and present?
7. ...we thanked God every day for our blessings?
8. ...we described our humanity and personhood in biblically-based but brand new terms?
9. ...we realized that many things we thought were “wrong” really were not?
10. ...we found ways of making people call us up to find out the “good news” of living the Christian life, as if they had just won the super lottery?

**And surprise of surprises, most of the answers are in Matthew 5, 6, 7, and 26:31-46 !!!**

**“Our technological world will only be saved by  
beauty and mysticism.”**

(Dostoevsky, Rahner, Von Balthasar)

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