

2009 - The Holy Season of Lent - MMIX

Introduction

In the earliest centuries of Christianity, morality and right conduct were never separated from spirituality and the quest for true happiness and joy. However, by the fourteenth century, a new morality devoid of spirituality and eudemonia developed that could be characterized as a *morality of obligation* and framed in terms of a struggle against sin. Therefore, moral thought became the domain of obligations, legal imperatives and was no longer concerned with the question of happiness (or human flourishing) and the dynamic moral notion of perfection, under the influence of divine grace. The shortcomings of such a morality was expressed by the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in the decree *Optatam totius*, “Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world” (OT, n. 16).

Renewed Moral Reasoning

Encouraged by the council Fathers, moral theologians embarked on its renewal; however, not every proposal proved to be fruitful. One priest, the late Dominican moralist Father Servais Pinckaers, did succeed to overcome the deficiencies in the prevailing morality of obligation. By nature, all people desire happiness and, hence, long for goodness. Moreover, endowed by God with free will, *libero arbitrio* is nothing else than the ability to choose what is good—those choices which will lead to true and lasting happiness. The challenge is to discover the means to ultimate happiness. Unfortunately, what appears good is not always so; sin can be seen as the counterfeit form of the good. Hence, evil is often attractive and can even become compelling. According to Father Pinckaers, the Spirit and its accompanying gifts have been poured out upon those who have been baptized and this spiritual endowment constitutes the theological and cardinal virtues—faith, hope, and love. Virtuous actions are the various dispositions of the human intellect, our will and the various emotions that make up the human person. Wisdom allows the mind to see beyond appearances to the nature of a particular desire. Prudence guides the mind’s ability to unravel complex dilemmas. Impulsive behavior is tamed by reason. Every virtuous deed when done in the proper manner

fills the soul with *delectatio* or joy. Any of the virtues have a perfective function—they govern the free will and, gradually, make choosing what is right and good somewhat easier. Yet, moral maturing is a slow process and true moral growth is never easy. The moral teachings of the Church serve to buttress our moral development whenever true moral maturity is lacking or underdeveloped. Such an external support seeks to promote virtuous behavior and the acquisition of moral maturity primarily through the theological virtues as the gift of the Holy Spirit. Growth in moral capability takes place in stages which are marked out by the Beatitudes—through becoming poor in spirit, remaining blessed despite mourning, allowing meekness of character to take root and so on. Over all these, it is the love of Christ that draws forth the goodness within. Crowning all this is true joy—not gleefulness, but inner peace and satisfaction that comes from doing what is right and good.

Freedom of Excellence vs. Freedom of Indifference

The mere ability to choose between doing something or not forms the basis of the common understanding of morality. This can be identified as the freedom of indifference, viz. as long as the moral agent can choose that is sufficient. Yet, this ability to choose between alternatives has now become identified with free will which is a fundamental error. Free will is the on going interaction between the innate hunger the human person has for goodness and the perception we have of what is good, which must be enlightened by God’s divine grace. If the mere ability to choose between A and B is wrongly conceived to be the domain of the free will, then this constitutes the freedom of indifference—the free will must be indifferent to what is good. This twisted understanding of free will does not address the innate hunger we have for goodness, nor the basic desire that all human beings have for happiness. Then, choosing is what constitutes morality and the individual agent’s ability to choose between options A or B is constitutive of morality. External moral laws become the enemy and an adversarial position is created between the moral act and agent. This impoverishment of substantive morality creates a schema of choice (or will)-law-obedience, instead of the more ancient structure of morality found in the Fathers of the Church and the work of Saint Thomas Aquinas where love-virtue-happiness are the structure, yielding growth and life in the Spirit.