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Understanding Catholic morality

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recognize that our capacity to be effective teachers springs from our recognition of who we are and not simply on what we do.

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Understanding Catholic Morality

Elizabeth Willems

New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997

189 pages, \$19.95 US Softcover

With the recent agreed statement between Roman Catholics and Lutherans on justification by faith, Elizabeth Willems' book on Catholic morality is timely. She roots Catholic ethics in faith in Jesus Christ and argues that putting on the "mind and heart of Christ" is the cornerstone of Catholic morality. Willems provides an introduction and overview to Catholic moral theology. Her view of Catholic morality emphasizes four themes: person-centredness, discipleship, conversion, and the development of Christian character. This character is rooted in the Jesus of the biblical texts as well as the relevant statements by the councils of the Church and papal documents. In putting on the mind and heart of Christ, she stresses the value of compassion. In dealing with the reality of sin, Willems utilizes an ethic based on just principles. These principles guide the Christian in dealing with the reality of sin which is in the world, in human structures and within the Christian person. In the development of an ethic based on character, Willems stresses the primacy of conscience. Conscience is God's voice and the Catholic Christian has a duty to follow that voice even when it leads the person against papal teaching. A brief history of moral theology is given beginning with the New Testament through the patristics, middle ages, reformation to the modern and post-modern world. Martin Luther is described as a reformer whose emphasis on grace, faith and mercy offered positive changes in moral theology.

Elizabeth Willems belongs to the School Sisters of Notre Dame and is director of field education and professor of moral theology at Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans. Her book is informed by her practice of ministry as well as her teaching of ethics. It is easy to read, provides ethical vignettes, and presents many of the ideas and principles crucial to Catholic moral theology. The book is in the spirit of Vatican II and not condemning of other ways of doing ethics. The emphasis on faith in Jesus and putting on the mind and heart of Christ is a welcome focus on grace and compassion.

The weakness of the book is that it gives the impression that this is the way that all Catholics do moral theology. She fails to present the complexity of Catholic moral theology and does not present the strong emphasis on deontology and natural law. Also, her vignettes raise ethical dilemmas but do not come up with an answer. Certainly, in this era of ecumenical dialogue, this book is worthwhile to read for a more positive view of Catholic morality in the 1990s.

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God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation

Charles L. Bartow

Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997
xiv + 189 pages, \$22.50 Softcover

Much ink has already been spilled describing the conditions of post-modernism and then either lamenting how it has eroded the authority of God's Word read and preached or celebrating the new homiletical configurations which have been stirred up by the flood. Charles Bartow, in *God's Human Speech: A Practical Theology of Proclamation*, resolutely binds these two streams together. In echoes of Calvin and Barth, he refuses to compromise God's prerogative to remain the God revealed in Scripture and yet he articulates a way for us to press human experience and pluralism into God's service. *Sola scriptura* need not inhibit our entanglement with the world because the "reformative or transformational thrust of our kerygmatic expectation...if far from simply...keeping up with the temper of the times. In fact, it has little if anything to do with establishing the gospel's relevance to the world as we construe it and experience it on our own terms. But it has everything to do with the gospel's keeping *us* relevant to the purposes of God whatever the vicissitudes of life" (55). And about these purposes of God Bartow is clear; his statement of the Christian kerygma rings throughout the work: "In Christ Jesus, God takes us as we are and presses us into the service of what God would have us be."

Bartow hangs his theology of God's Word on analogies made with three figures of speech, oxymoron, metaphor, and metonymy. God's Word is oxymoron (contradictions held in tension) when it comes in its strangeness revealing itself in discontinuity with our lived experience. Metaphor (where things are both like and unlike each other) is God's device for simultaneously confirming our life experience without allowing a collapse into total