

The Linacre Quarterly

Volume 45 | Number 2

Article 14

May 1978

The Moral Needs of Man in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition

Paul M. Quay

Follow this and additional works at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq>

Recommended Citation

Quay, Paul M. (1978) "The Moral Needs of Man in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition," *The Linacre Quarterly*: Vol. 45: No. 2, Article 14.
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/lnq/vol45/iss2/14>

The Moral Needs of Man in the Judaeo-Christian Tradition

Paul M. Quay, S.J.

The following is the text of a talk given by Father Quay to the annual meeting of the National Federation of Catholic Physicians' Guilds in Chicago on Sept. 21, 1977.

When this talk was first proposed to me, I thought: "The moral needs of man in the Judaeo-Christian tradition — in a half-hour?" I couldn't think what I could possibly say on the subject that I could put into a half-hour. So I began to look around for other topics, for "hot" ones from current medical-moral theology. But I gradually came to realize the wisdom of whomever had proposed the title. All the topics with which I came up were controversial because of what that title implies. The moral needs of man seem to go one way; the Judaeo-Christian tradition, another; yet all man's moral needs are contained in and met by that tradition.

As Dr. Ratner made clear with his quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the relation between the natural law — the law of our nature as God made us — and Christian behavior (which, of course, is going to be defined by the Judaeo-Christian tradition), has been long and much debated. It has turned out to be a very difficult topic. And though it was one of the central issues at the time of the Reformation, it goes back much further, to the disputes with the Gnostic heretics and back even to St. Paul.

The problem, like all human problems, begins in the Garden of Eden, where man first set himself against God. If we want to understand this relationship between morality and revelation however, we have to go back even before the fall. How did God create man in the first place? He created him a single being, filled with grace, living the life of God in the very living of his natural human life, all inseparably. There was no cleavage then between grace and nature. It is only when man sins that one suddenly has to make a distinction, because he lost the life of grace by his sin.

The Greek Fathers of the Church talked about man, his nature, and grace in terms of that passage, in the first chapter of Genesis: "God said, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.'" They said, "The image — this represents what is permanent in man, even after the fall, although battered, defiled, wounded, and weakened in every

aspect. Nonetheless it continues; in its basic lines it is still somehow present. But the likeness — that was destroyed, simply wiped out, as a result of original sin.” And so the original unity was disrupted, and the shattering made worse as a result of our own sins.

But by the redemption, by what Christ has done for us, we are being led back to unity, but to a unity which is different and higher than the original unity. Christ is the second Adam; but He is more than another man. He is also the perfect Word of the Father. He is that image of the Father and that likeness of the Father in which we were made in the first place. So that when Scripture says that man was made in the image and according to the likeness of God, it doesn't mean simply that he was made *to be* the image and the likeness of God. Christ is the image and the likeness of God, perfect image and perfect likeness. We are made in Him Who is the image, according to that likeness which is our Lord. It is, then, to this we are called.

Now, how does God go about healing man's nature, making the image intact once more? Strangely enough, instead of working on what is in His image (our nature) directly, He works on what accords with His likeness (grace). When we are disintegrated by sin, He pours in the life of grace and, then, working with us now in some way restored as to the likeness, He lets that likeness work on us and through us to remake our nature and to restore it. He does this at baptism and whenever He forgives our own grave sins. The process is especially clear in infant baptism, when the infant is incapable of any natural moral action, good or bad. But already the likeness to God is restored, turns the infant's will towards God, and begins to help this child to grow and develop in accord with the human nature of Christ.

You may say now, “Why worry about all of this? What's the point of it?” Well, the point of it becomes clear when we recall the problem of relating natural ethics and Christian morality. If we look at Vatican Council II, if we read through the documents with some care, we'll find that it states fairly clearly — and rather sharply in some places — most of the ethical norms with which we have grown up. One could reconstruct, by going through the Council, most of the things in the standard moral books, though with widely varying degree of detail. Yet one could also go through the whole of those documents and miss most of them because they clearly do not get much emphasis. There are a few exceptions: the morality of warfare, for example, as also certain things in marital morality, economic morality, and social morality. But, on the whole, morality and ethics are given fairly short shrift. They seem mostly taken for granted. They are assumed.

But what *does* the Council emphasize? Some quotations follow, all of which are taken from decrees which discuss the secular layman's function in the Church, the role of the man who works in the world to remake the world. So, from *The Church in the Modern World* (p. 43),

"It is the proper function of the layman, although it is not exclusively his, by his secular tasks and activities . . . to see to it that the divine law is written into the life of the earthly city." From the *Constitution on the Church* (p. 31): "It is the characteristic vocation of lay people to seek the Kingdom of God by carrying on temporal affairs and ordering them as God wishes. . . . Laymen live in the world; . . . there they are called by God to exercise their own special office. . . . In the likeness of a yeast, let them contribute to the sanctification of the world as if from within. . . . It is their special function so to illumine and order all temporal matters that they are constantly coming about according to Christ and growing and existing for the praise of their Creator and Redeemer." Another passage is from the *Decree on the Missions*, which, after a considerable lengthy introduction on the role of the layman in the world, remarks (p. 21), "The principal office of the laity, both men and women, is to bear witness to Christ. By their own life and words, whether in the family, their social groups, or their professional environment, they are required to render such witness."

Emphasis Upon Holiness

As one looks through these and a great number of further quotations, especially the fifth chapter of the *Decree on the Church*, "The Universal Call to Holiness in the Church," there is continual emphasis upon the holiness to which every person in the Church is called. There is no question of restricting it to any particular way of life whatever. Each of the faithful, by the simple fact of his baptism, is called to the fullness of holiness according to his state of life. Yet, in that same fifth chapter, which so insists upon this universal call to holiness, morality, strangely enough, is mentioned only once, almost in passing at the end of a sentence. There is a great deal about God's presence in the world and Christians' manifesting it, about the testimony they must bear to Christ, about the perpetual action of the Spirit upon and in them. But morality is mentioned only as part of what is necessary in order to let the life of charity grow.

A fair number of moralists have taken advantage of this situation to pretend, erroneously in my judgment, that the Council didn't really want to talk about traditional morality any more at all, that this is a dead issue, that now there is a new morality built simply on the presence of God in the world, and that one ought not to think of certain, particular acts being always wrong, etc. I think such moralists are wrong, chiefly because the Council did not say what they say, but also because of their misunderstanding of the relationship between holiness and morality. For morality is absolutely essential to holiness, and yet not essential in the way we ordinarily think.

One hears people at times speaking about how the Christian life develops as if our first job, as we begin to grow up, is to realize that there are things that are forbidden very solemnly by God. If we do

them anyway and persevere in such defiance and don't change, we'll go to hell for them. So the Christian's first task as he grows is to learn to avoid mortal sin. Then, having overcome mortal sin, at least on the whole, he works against venial sins. Then, if he lives long enough, eventually he can begin to work on making himself truly good and holy. Avoiding all but occasional venial sin, he seeks to perfect his practice of the virtues, finally coming to the place where he begins a mystical life with the Lord in raptures, ecstasies, and all the things we tend to associate with "high sanctity." This sketch is a travesty, of course; nonetheless, it represents a tendency, I think, with which very often we have to wrestle.

Does sanctity require that one already be a perfectly moral being, since avoidance of sin and the practice of virtue are the function of a moral life? If we look at Abraham, we see that his morality was, at least by our standards, not very well-developed, even wrong; yet he was a great friend of the Lord's. God took him as His own special friend, revealed Himself to him, and raised him up in very high holiness. Then there was Moses; his morality was better than that of Abraham; his friendship with God apparently as great, though there is no real way to compare them. On through the kings and the prophets. We know that David, at least, had his serious moral lapses. Solomon seemed to make them habitual — hundreds of wives and those mostly pagan. For this he was rebuked, that he went after the pagans, not that he had so many wives. All through the history of Israel we find only a very gradual, slow growth in moral understanding in ethical comprehension, and yet, from Abraham on, great saints, people extraordinarily close to God at every epoch.

There is clearly a connection. If one is immoral, if he deliberately sets aside the moral order as he knows it, one cannot be a friend of God at all, unless he repents. For God revealed Himself to Abraham, no less to Moses and to us, as the source and upholder of the moral law. It is clear that one's morality can be very imperfect, however, and he can still be a very close friend of God. So the question returns: how can we think of these things in a useful way, without getting ourselves into the dilemma that Dietrich Bonhoeffer pointed out? Must we attribute everything to grace, faith, revelation, and the like, and see everything that is not of grace as bad, evil, sinful, including our nature, unless we are, on the other hand, to become rationalists who think of everything within the limits of what our reason can do out on the subject?

Recalling what we've seen of the history of salvation and of how we are healed by God and how He "still more wondrously restores us," let us look at this being that we are, both fallen and elevated again into the life of God, through which the healing processes of our nature constantly go on as we grow in His life. These things can be looked at in two ways, however. One way, which has been all too common and

which is dominant today in moral theology or what passes for such, looks at the natural law or the moral order principally through the eyes of fallen nature. One uses his own experience, his own reason, his own insights, forgetting not only that the nature at which he's looking is fallen as well as elevated, but that his own nature, which is doing the looking, is *also* fallen as well as elevated. If we seek to understand human nature entirely in terms of what we can see, whether looking outward or at our own hearts, with our own minds, dispositions, and attitudes — and those alone or primarily — we are looking through very bleared and distorting eyes at something that is already badly damaged and distorted. Consequently, a natural-law ethics of that sort will only serve to lead us astray.

Seeing Certain Major Features

This is not to say that, looking so, we cannot see moral truth at all. We can, indeed, see something, certain major features; but there will be distortion, there will be blurring, there will be ambiguity, there will be flat error growing out of any such attempt. After all, the sin of Adam is depicted as a sin in which the eating of the forbidden fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil is the central element. Now it seems that for the ancient Semites, to eat of the fruit of a plant or tree abstractly named tree of life, tree of the knowledge of good and evil or whatever, meant in symbol to exercise power and authority over whatever was designated by the name of the tree. So if you were able to eat the fruit of the tree of life, this, in Scripture, in the Gilgamesh epic, and in other ancient near-Eastern religious literature, meant to live forever. Precisely because you had eaten the fruit of this, you showed that you had authority over it. You plucked and took into your own being the power of life. So, to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil meant for man to decide on his own authority what should be considered good and bad, not beginning with the Lord's word on it but determining entirely on his own, from his own heart and mind and experience, what should be good and bad.

Consequently, the great temptation for the ethicist or the moralist, working on the basis of human nature, is to do exactly this: to judge for himself what is good or bad, looking at fallen and only partially restored nature through his own vision, badly distorted because he too is a fallen creature, only partially restored as yet, without much regard for what the Church's teaching has been and is.

On the other hand, one can, by the power of faith, look at natural law through God's eyes. As the one Who made our nature, He looks on it with love. He is the one genuine friend of our human nature, for He loves our nature far more than we do. He created it and He preserves it, restores it when we damage it, raises it so as to share in His own life. Above all else, He took it into Himself in the Incarnation, so that

God is human forever, having a body of flesh, blood, and bones, like our own, glorious now as we hope that ours will be. Since faith is a sharing in Christ's own knowledge of the Father and in the Father's knowledge of all He made in and through His Son and likeness, insofar as we transcend our own ideas and modes of understanding by the power of our faith, we will see with undimmed vision.

When we look at human nature, then, from an ethical point of view, the question we ought to be asking is: What befits, what is suitable to, the man who is living in Christ? What behavior is fitting for the man who is anointed by the Spirit, as Christ was Who shares that Spirit with us? But notice, we cannot see our true nature unless we look at it in the only places where it is whole and undamaged — in our Lord and in our Lady. Only there is our nature complete, integral, as it was intended to be from the beginning, and as a valid and universal norm of conduct.

If we take this approach, what does the natural law look like? Clearly, Scripture tells us, first of all, that there is a natural law. St. Paul, strong as he is about the demise of the Old Law which includes the natural law, still insists that the pagans have a law written in their hearts; even if they have no revealed law, they still are, through their consciences, a law for their own conduct. The Psalms make very clear that the law of God is written in men's hearts and that it is one of God's greatest gifts to men. When we look at our nature, or the law that grows from our nature, in the light of faith, it is as if we were looking at an X-ray picture of a human body, our natures being like the skeleton. We have a bony structure in ourselves which extends us in space so that our organs have room to grow and develop, our brain is protected, the different parts of our body are properly organized and held in certain fixed relations and orientation. We can raise our arms while holding heavy things in our hand because of the strength of the bones which enable the arm not to droop but to support the weight. This structural armature serves as base for our muscles and gives strength to our entire being.

Yet, in the living body, it is something very different from what it is when one takes it out and hangs it on the wall of a medical school where there are only the dry bones. It does have the same structure when it's hanging on the wall as when it's in the body — the skull, the little neck bones, the ribs and so on. Yet strangely enough, if by some kind of a miracle I could remove the skeleton from this person and put the dried one into his body without disrupting a single cell of flesh, all connections perfect, this person, I am told, would still die. The reason is that the skeleton is much more than simply a structure which keeps parts of the body in their proper positions, supports weight, protects the brain, and the like. It is also an organ, or a set of organs; it relates to the way the blood is formed, develops, it relates to

the immune processes of the body, and various other things which I do not understand. It is a living thing and its structure is only one of its aspects.

Natural Law Like Skeleton

The natural law, when taken apart from the view of faith, is like the skeleton on the med-school wall. Its basic structure is correct; it can give correct answers to some questions. If one looks at the dried and wired skeleton, even if he is no doctor at all and knows next to nothing about the organic functions of the skeleton in the body, he can still say, "Yes, this is pretty much what I feel when I poke somebody — here are the ribs — yeah, I can feel those." One can test it out that, indeed, the living structure is very similar. But upon looking very closely, he'll see that the structure isn't completely similar. The cartilage is missing or shrunken; the bones don't fit properly; the skeleton on the wall hangs in a posture you rarely see in a living person. Yet, for all of that, basically, the structure is the same. But the life is gone. The same is true for the natural law, taken in itself. Whereas, the natural law, as it is meant to be, namely, embodied in a nature that is alive with the life of God which is made in the likeness of Christ, which is suffused with His Spirit, this serves an endless range of functions. It is not merely an ethics, not merely a proper moral reasoning and action. It is something that makes us grow in the knowledge of God and in the love of God. It enables us to live in this world the way Christ would have us live, as His brothers and His sisters, doing with our own bodies some of the things He did in this world.

Now, all that sounds awfully abstract. I would like to bring it down a little to the concrete questions of physicians. When we talk about medical ethics we have to be talking about a much broader range of things than goes under that name in such books as I've looked at. We are talking about the right behavior of those who are called to be the imitators and followers of the divine Physician. Something, strangely, that doctors don't appreciate perhaps enough is that they don't need a patron saint, as lawyers do, because Christ Himself, is their special patron. He has made Himself our Physician; and consequently, our task is to be like Him.

Clearly, this implies a great breadth of activity and of reflection. If a doctor is to heal the body of man, somehow that healing is a part of the healing of the nature of man in its totality. That means the doctor must heal as He heals. Christ came to heal by grace, sharing with us the life of God which is the life of charity, that love which in us grows out of faith. God gave us His love before there was anything in us to be loved. When we are still in our sins, He loves us and raises us up and makes us worthy of His love. But He gives the love before we are worthy. Consequently, Christ came with universal compassion, even for the people He had to fight.

He respected the integrity and the freedom of each single person. He forced no one, not even the scribes and the Pharisees, not even the Temple priests. He clearly dealt with each individual as an individual. He did not treat them as members of a family only; in fact, He seemed at times to disrupt the family in calling His apostles. His call was always to the individual, even if to each and every one of a crowd, though He respected the family — remember His gentleness with the mother of James and John, who followed Him and her sons, whatever Zebedee may have thought about it. He showed to each person the unique dignity He had in being a child of the Father.

All that He knew He was willing to share with them, to let them know also, so that they could grow through that knowledge. He sought nothing for Himself as a result of this except their health, their growth. Clearly enough, Jesus is a model Whom we can only distantly approach and that, only in the limit. And yet it is this that medical moral must involve: being like Christ, imitating Him, in charity for the unlovable, respect for patients, concern with each individual patient's rights, sharing of knowledge, and selflessness.

At the same time there must also be the internal structure, the moral skeleton, solid natural-law ethics, the detailed, very delicate, analytical arguments as to when one may turn off this life-sustaining machine or turn on some other, when to inform the patient of this or that, when this surgery is called for, is purely optional, should not be done. There is an endless range, which I probably cannot even guess at, of enormous problems; and they are made more difficult because of the pressure of society, our whole culture, bearing down, often poisoning the atmosphere with things that bear no relationship to either Christ or humanity. There is much, even, of theology which has compromised with the world and can only serve to lead people astray.

Work to be Done

So there is much work to be done. But it has to be done in the light of what Christ is as the Divine Physician. We must work on natural-law ethics, work on it in detail but notice, it has to be in an interaction within the Body of Christ. In other words, priests and moral theologians and people in spirituality, physicians and medical researchers and nurses — and all of those who have competence in *any* of these aspects of medical problems — must work together. It seems to me essential that no one go off and simply do ethics — medical ethics, however defined — all by himself. He can't know enough first of all, even on the order of reason. But, secondly, if one stands on reason, one will not stand long. He will only be able to bear witness to Christ by a life of integrity in accordance with the knowledge which faith gives him of what is right and wrong, if he has the courage that comes from Christ, if he is living the life of Christ, and knows that, by refusing to do this or that evil action, he is bearing witness to the Lord Himself. It is

important, too, to make it known, very simply, why one is doing some good or refusing some evil. Let a person's witness be to the Creator and not merely to this nature He created. Then one will have the courage and will be able to act as Christ. For it is not enough just to avoid grave sin; we are called to speak positively according to our faith and to act courageously from our hope and charity.

One final point: it is, I think, this way only that physicians will have that freedom of spirit to do always what they are called upon to do without having to consult at every moment. Physicians have the Spirit of the Lord, in greater or less degree, and can have It always more. So, one has to learn what he can of what's going on in medical ethics, natural-law morality, and the Christian theology of morals; nonetheless, it is the doctor on the spot, with the knowledge he has, with such competence as he has managed to acquire, who must make the decision. And that decision should be made by a person in Christ, with great freedom, in the knowledge that God has put him there. He knows more about the decision presumably than any one else on the spot, insofar as it is his decision to make. But insofar as it is his decision to make, he must make it in the freedom of Christ, drawing on all the helps he can have and then, confident, going ahead to do the best he can. God has not guaranteed anyone save our Lord exemption from error; even the Pope except when speaking *ex cathedra* is not guaranteed such exemption; certainly none of us will be.

Let me end, then, by commenting again on the tremendous problem that we face in our world today: this splitting of man — as if one could somehow look at him naturally over here, where we and the pagans could presumably come up with the same answers, and then look at him in terms of faith over here, where Catholics act very differently. "They're funny people," the pagans say. "They only do certain kinds of procedures; they won't do certain other ones. They admit that they can't always give clear reasons. So there is clearly something wrong with them. So we must put pressure on them to help them get into line." What we have to make very clear to ourselves and to others is that there is only one humanity that is true. That is the humanity that is Christ's, which we share in and which is the instrument of the Father to form together all, grace and nature, into that human person which images Him to the world and is like Him in all our actions. So you physicians will be alive and free and decisive, dealing as best you can with the great tasks of medicine, trying to restore both physically, mentally, spiritually and in every way, these damaged human persons, who now are called to glory.
