

CHRIST AND THE
DYNAMISM OF ACTION:
OUTLOOK AND OVERVIEW OF
CHRISTOCENTRISM
IN MORAL THEOLOGY

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“Christian moral theology will . . . acquire a personalistic and responsorial character: it will arise as a response to the totally gratuitous encounter with Christ.”

Since initial attempts, dating as far back as the 1930s, to renew Catholic moral theology in relation to its post-tridentine manualist tradition, the question of christocentrism has come into contact with more innovative theological proposals, and has swung back and forth between enthusiastic programs and declarations of inconclusiveness or outright failure.¹ The bold proposals for a radically new approach

¹For a general overview, see A. Bonandi, “Modelli di teologia morale nel ventesimo secolo,” in *Teologia* 24 (1999): 89–138, 206–43. J. Reiter offers a summary, covering only the realm of German scholarship before the second Vatican Council, of the various attempts at working out a christocentric approach to moral theology, in his *Modelle christozentrischer Ethik. Eine historische Untersuchung in systematischer Absicht* (Düsseldorf: Patmos, 1984).

centered on the person of Christ,² which marked the preconconciliar and immediate postconciliar periods, were succeeded, particularly in the seventies, by drastic calls to abandon this road in light of the demands of rational autonomy and the universality of ethics. Franz Böckle's pronouncement represents the common sentiment: "the focus on christology stands in contradiction to a normative universalization."³

The encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*, for its part, has recalled that "the following of Christ is the essential foundation of Christian morality" (19). This constitutes an implicit and authoritative invitation to take up the question of christocentrism once again in moral theology as a privileged starting point for the renewal that is being called for (cf. 29). To be sure, accepting such an invitation does not mean ignoring the problems that have emerged in recent theology. The present article, therefore, intends to review, albeit in a necessarily schematic and general fashion, the principal models of christocentrism that have been proposed, paying special attention to the theoretical knots that have emerged along the way, in order to find a positive orientation for future investigation that will allow us to meet the proper demands of a truly scientific moral theology.⁴

1. Preliminary Methodological Questions

It is clear to the eyes of all that christocentrism in moral theology has been subject to different interpretations and applications, some obviously one-sided and inadequate.⁵ Let us first clarify what is meant by christocentrism. From the perspective of dogmatic

²According to F. Tillmann, moral theology, as a scientific enterprise, ought to show "die unmittelbare Bindung der Sittenlehre an die Person des Herrn" [the immediate connection between moral teaching and the person of Christ], *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi* (Düsseldorf: Schwann, 1934) 10f.

³Böckle, *Fundamental-moral* (München: Kösel, 1977), 234. The North American moral theologian, Charles E. Curran, recently justified the rejection of a christocentric approach for the same reason: *The Catholic Moral Tradition Today: A Synthesis* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1999), 31: "I also have problems using Jesus Christ as [a] stance because this approach has been used by some in the past to ground a very narrow Christology or Christomonism that gives little or no independent room or importance to the human. . . ."

⁴Cf. *Optatam totius*, 16.

⁵Cf. *Ibid.*, 78.

theology, Giacomo Biffi proposes the following definition: “it is the vision of reality that makes the humanity of the incarnate Son of God the foundational ontological principle of the whole creation, in all its levels and dimensions.”⁶ On the other hand, to avoid a one-sided christomonism, it is also appropriate to specify that the focus of christocentrism is primarily methodological, in the strict sense of the word: christocentrism does not account for the whole material content of theology, but “it indicates the point of view from which to contemplate the form of Revelation.”⁷

However, to enter specifically into the context of moral theology and its disciplinary demands, we must ask ourselves: in what sense does Christ, who is the ontological principle of the whole of reality in his humanity as incarnate Son of God, become in addition the adequate principle for understanding human action in its proper dynamism? Of course, the models that have in fact been proposed within moral theology do not all affirm christocentrism to the same degree or with the same precision; they are not all critically aware to the same degree of its significance, and they are not equally adequate to the specific demands of a theory of moral action. The spectrum ranges from an affirmation of the primacy of Christ as exemplary model to an acknowledgment of a christic ontology of the moral subject, from a reference to the critical mediation of anthropology up to an affirmation of his concrete human existence as the categorical norm.

At the heart of our concern is the possibility of providing a foundation for moral theology that is at once truly “theological” and “scientific,” according to the directives laid out by the Second Vatican Council and, in a particular manner, by the encyclical *Veritatis Splendor*. The two constitutive dimensions of such a project of moral theology are moreover the elements necessary for its

⁶G. Biffi, *Approccio al cristocentrismo. Note storiche per un tema eterno* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1994), 11; see also: G. Moiola, “Cristocentrismo,” in *Nuovo Dizionario di teologia*, ed. G. Barboglio and S. Dianich (Alba: Paoline, 1977), 210–22. H.U. von Balthasar, *La mia opera ed Epilogo* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1994): “Christ himself stands in the true theological center, in relation to which the world and creation receive their structure. . . . The one and only existential figure of Christ forms the center of history.” (55); Christ, the *universale concretum*, is the sole point that opens into the universal and cosmic Logos (57).

⁷A. Scola, *Hans Urs von Balthasar: uno stile teologico* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1991), 59–60.

elaboration as a critical and systematic reflection on the action of the Christian in the light of the Gospel.⁸

On the one hand, and most importantly, there is the need for a *theological* foundation for moral discourse. A reflection that is genuinely nourished by Sacred Scripture needs to be situated within the context of “the most high vocation of the faithful in Christ,” and thus within the context of the single supernatural end of man—the loving vision of God, which gratuitously fulfills, beyond any creaturely expectation and capacity, the human desire for happiness. On the other hand, the elaboration of a christocentric moral theology must exhibit the necessary scientific rigor, carrying out its investigation organically and critically in the light of revelation by means of rational arguments, and thus making use of philosophical and conceptual tools capable of giving an adequate interpretation of moral experience even while respecting its dynamism and logic. The quality of a theological proposal is therefore to be judged according to its capacity to integrate these two elements, both respecting their own inner necessities and organically uniting them. Thus, in order to apply the perspective that concerns us here, i.e., the christocentric approach, to moral theology, we need a theory of action that is mediated by specifically ethical categories.

Among these preliminary methodological considerations, two questions come immediately to the fore to serve as a basis from which to inquire into the various models and to delineate the basic forms of a possible christocentrism in moral theology:

1) At what level of the content of moral reflection does the christocentric principle become effective? As mentioned above, it must enter in at the level of the formal object: it cannot simply concern a new material content to be juxtaposed to that of the manualistic tradition, or a project into which all content is resolved. It must rather enter in as a horizon, a point of view from which to illuminate the moral dynamism of Christian life.

2) Moreover, it must concern a principle that can ensure the internal unity of the scientific discipline; in other words, it must in a genuine sense represent the ultimate foundation that grounds every other principle or point of reference, without extrinsicism or one-sidedness. In this respect, the thematic controversy over the relationship between nature and grace, which has been debated at

⁸Cf. G. Perini, *Il “trattato” di teologia morale fondamentale*, Divus Thomas, 14 (Bologna: Ed. Studio Domenicano, 1996), 137–39.

length within the dogmatic context of christocentrism, finds a particularly significant point of verification in the realm of moral theology: how do we integrate the rational moral demands for universality—a point that has been defended in the traditional doctrine of the natural law—within the theological resolution of every law in the historical particularity of Jesus Christ, the “*plenitudo legis*”?

2. *Christocentrism as Affirmation of a Personalist Model*

The first form of christocentrism that has emerged in contemporary moral theology uses the “personal model” as its guiding category: Christ forms the center of moral life and therefore of theological reflection insofar as he is a paradigmatic person. Morality need no longer consist in a collection of fragmented rules, but may be seen as grounded in a living person, who offers the ideal to follow. The term “model” functions therefore as a concrete mediation between the universal and the particular.

The christocentric approach first emerged in the field of German language scholarship, with a remarkable burst of originality, in the work of Fritz Tillmann, a true innovator;¹⁰ it was taken up again at the end of the 1950s and given a personalistic and dialogical emphasis by Bernhard Häring, in his well-known textbook *The Law of Christ*, which had enormous popular success, also because of its attention to the pastoral dimension.

In light of the post-Tridentine manualist tradition,¹¹ it became clear that two things were needed: First, the theological and specifically Christian character of morality needed to be brought to light. As it stood, modern manualism had carved out its space as an

⁹Saint Ambrose, *In Psalmum CXVIII*, sermo 18, 37: PL 15, 1541, cited in *Veritatis splendor*, 15.

¹⁰His *Die Idee der Nachfolge Christi* (1934), cited above, was published as the third volume of a comprehensive study edited by F. Tillmann, *Handbuch der katholischen Sittenlehre*, with the collaboration of T. Steinbüchel and T. Müncker. In Italian, it was translated only in an abridged edition by F. Tillmann, *Il Maestro chiama. Compendio di teologia morale* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 1950).

¹¹In this regard, J.A. Gallagher, *Time Past, Time Future. An Historical Study of Catholic Moral Theology* (Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1990), 29–139; L. Vereecke, *Da Guglielmo d'Ockham a sant'Alfonso de Liguori. Saggi di storia della teologia morale moderna (1300–1787)* (Roma: Paoline, 1990).

autonomous discipline,¹² severing itself from dogmatics on the one side (and therefore from its foundation), and from spirituality on the other (and therefore from its end). Thus moral theologians, having recourse to priests for the administering of confession, ended up focusing on the minimum legal requirements established by reason, or on an ecclesiastical legal positivism.¹³ For those seeking renewal, the order of the day was therefore to reinsert moral theology back into the broader context of theological wisdom, to reestablish its vital connections with dogmatics and spirituality and to distinguish it more clearly from canon law.

In the second place, the need was recognized to find an organic principle of unity of the Christian moral life, which would correspond to a systematic principle of demonstration on the theological level. The manualistic tradition was interested in the regulation of individual external acts (by means of a systematization of “cases”), examined in the light of precepts and discrete norms. This resulted in a fragmentation of the material object of morality, which was never considered from the unifying perspective of the acting subject, but rather from the varied perspectives of the external objects, circumstances, and different particular motivations. The theological demand to bring out the Christian character of moral theology meets up here with the scientific demand to find a systematic principle of demonstration.¹⁴

The central idea of the work of Tillmann is the immediate connection between moral doctrine and the very person of the Lord Jesus, insofar as he is the source of Christian life. This occurs by means of the category of imitation (*Nachfolge*). “Precisely in this idea,” he affirms, “the concepts of model and copy, of norm and value, of the ‘ought’ and the ‘is,’ of thought and of life find their inherent connection, their fundamental determination and their

¹²Cf. J. Theiner, *Die Entwicklung der Moralthologie als eigenständigen Disziplin* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1970).

¹³Cf. S. Pinckaers, *Les sources de la morale chrétienne. Sa méthode, son contenu, son histoire* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1985), 258–82. [English Translation: *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, trans. Mary Thomas Noble (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1995).]

¹⁴This is the problem of the so-called “Aufbauprinzip,” that is, the finding of a unifying principle for constituting the science of morality: J.F. Groner, *Das Aufbauprinzip der Moralthologie* (Heidelberg, 1972); K. Demmer, *Moralthologische Methodenlehre* (Paris, Du Cerf: 1989), 53–70.

obligatoriness, according to the personalistic stamp that ethical teaching needs.”¹⁵ The formulations give us an insight into the dependence of personalistic ethics on values, which Max Scheler elaborated during the same period on a philosophical level, as an attack on the abstract formalism of Kantian ethics.¹⁶

The particularity of a person we are meant to follow acts as a catalyst in the vital perception of values. The Jesus paradigm thus offers a “norm-giving personality” (*normierende Persönlichkeit*) in relation to good and evil. Tillmann proposes a perfect identity between “that which is good” and “that which is conformed to Christ” (*Christusförmig*), and correlatively between “that which is evil” and “that which is contrary to him” (*Christuswidrig*).¹⁷ Of course, the personal ethical model should not be imitated in an extrinsic fashion, but rather creatively assimilated as a basis for one’s own original formation.

Twenty years later, the work of Bernhard Häring will profit from Tillman’s lesson, carrying it into a context that emphasizes dialogical responsivity: the moral life is constituted in a dynamic of call and response, which emerges from the encounter with Christ (*Ruf und Antwort: Verantwortung*).¹⁸ In effect, for Häring, the moral dimension has its ultimate context of meaning in religion. In this respect, his christocentrism lies at the convergence of two facts: Christ is the Father’s call to us to live a holy and good life and at the same time he is the principle that enables our answer. “Law,” here, becomes the mediating category, as the title of the same work indicates. The expression “of Christ” must be understood primarily as a subjective genitive, which ties ethics to anthropology, and anthropology to christology, in a radical way. Häring comes to affirm that “moral theology is an area within christology”;¹⁹ in fact, “the norm, the center and the scope of Christian moral theology is

¹⁵F. Tillmann, *Die Idee*, 10.

¹⁶M. Scheler, *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik. Neuer Versuch der Grundlegung eines ethischen Personalismus*, in *Werke*, vol. I (Bern: Francke Verlag, 1954).

¹⁷F. Tillmann, *Die Idee*, 12.

¹⁸Cf. B. Häring, *Das Gesetz Christi. Moralthologie dargestellt für Priester und Laien*, vol. I (Freiburg i.Br.: Herder, 1954), 86.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, 99.

Christ himself. The law of the Christian is nothing other than Christ in person.”²⁰

The principle limitation of this first model of moral christocentrism is its “material” character: within the line of moral reflection that these authors introduced, it remains only an initial chapter, one founded on immediate references to biblical citations; the influence of the christological principle is limited to providing a motivation for action, and it does not manage to penetrate the dynamic of action. It is more an object than an approach. Indeed, when it comes to offering normative directives, Tillmann refers simply to the natural law. For him, the christocentric element concerns only the internal motivation for action, while the universality of the determinate content is assured by reason. Häring takes a genuine step forward and attempts to give a christocentric conception of the natural law, understanding it as the law of creation, which is ordered to its fulfillment in Christ. Nevertheless, we find in him a clear reiteration of the neo-scholastic manualistic dichotomy between subject and object, between conscience and law: the personalistic element is reduced once again to interiority, while objectivity concerns the external action, grasped in relationship to the norm.²¹ The language betrays an unresolved tension, a latent conflict threatening at any moment to explode, between the subjective conscience and the objective law.

3. The Indispensable Mediating Role of Anthropology in Christocentrism

The Second Vatican Council, appropriating and promoting a christocentric vision of theology, especially in certain passages of the pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes*, speaks, in relation specifically to moral theology, of “the most high vocation of the faithful in Christ” (*Optatam totius*, 16). In spite of this authoritative impetus, the most prevalent drift in postconciliar moral theology does not correspond to this outlook, but instead follows the path that seeks a universal communicability based exclusively on reason. The specifically Christian dimension of action is put between parentheses

²⁰Ibid., 25.

²¹In this sense A. Bonandi, “Modelli,” 206–24, speaks correctly of a “mixed” model.

or relegated to the transcendental level. In every case, attempts to provide a christocentric foundation for moral theology have since run up on the one side against the question of universality and, on the other side, against the related, but not identical, question of autonomy. The first is well demonstrated in the study by Angelo Scola, who poses the question, “how is it possible to reconcile the universality of ethical claims with an insistence on founding ethics on the particularity of the christological event?”²² This is the more properly theological aspect of the problem of christocentrism. The second question, of a specifically moral character, asks how the reference to christology can avoid heteronomy in the order of moral norms, and still more radically, how it can avoid remaining extrinsic to the dynamic of human activity.

Klaus Demmer’s reflection was born precisely in the recognition of the failure of pre-conciliar christocentrism and in the perception that the decisive problem is to find a suitable mediation between the particularity of the christological event, which is grasped in faith, and the universal moral norm, which is established by reason. In the light of the two earlier methodological alternatives, i.e., the formal autonomy of moral reason and its immanent historicity, the model proposed by Demmer turns on the mediation of anthropology: “the singular salvific event of Jesus Christ and the universality of moral reason have to be mediated by thought.”²³

Faith, which recognizes in Christ the fullness of revelation, has no direct impact in the order of action; no immediately valid rule of action can be derived from it at the practical level. Nevertheless, the christological event gives rise to the presuppositions for the believer’s new self-understanding, which is developed historically in the form of a normative anthropology. This anthropology is grounded in reason, and is therefore universally communicable. According to Demmer, “the anthropological-transcendental presuppositions of the understanding and of moral practice are transformed in Jesus Christ.”²⁴ Faith thus has an impact on morality

²²A. Scola, *Cristologia e morale*, in *Questioni di antropologia teologica*, 2^a ed. (Roma: PUL-Mursia, 1997), 107–30.

²³K. Demmer, *Deuten und Handeln. Grundlagen und Grundfragen der Fundamentalmoral* (Paris: Du Cerf, 1985), chapter 3: “Christologie und Anthropologie,” 78–130, here: 86.

²⁴*Ibid.*, 110.

at the level of transcendental intentionality (that is, of the fundamental option), but it also has repercussions with regard to categorical content. Through a constant and complex hermeneutical effort on the anthropological level, which is carried out by the believing community, the content of intentionality does not get restricted only to the transcendental order, but, while respecting the autonomy and historicity of human reason, it manages in the end to influence even the categorical rules of action.

The proposal we are explaining accepts with great critical rigor the theoretical challenges of christocentrism in light of the methodological demands of moral theology, striving to reconcile the particularity of the christological event with the universality of practical reason by means of the distinction between the transcendental and categorical. What plays the mediating role here is anthropology, understood as the normative self-understanding of the believer that unfolds in a continually ongoing hermeneutical effort. We can ask however whether this christocentrism, which is mediated by human understanding, is yet successful in safeguarding the theological principle of the particularity of Christ. The hermeneutical perspective reduces its significance to the impact of a sensible event, which lies irrevocably in the “past,” on the self-understanding of a community that is based on it, in substantial analogy with other historical phenomena. If it is human thought, in its historical dynamics, that grounds the connection, it seems that the effective meaning of the christological event will inevitably fall prey to a conflict between competing interpretations.

4. The Ontological Foundation of Christian Morality “in Christ”

Other moral theologians, especially those of the Alfonsian tradition, followed an altogether different path. In continuity with the teaching of B. Häring, but in strict critical dialogue with the new developments in post-conciliar theology, these theologians elaborated a christocentric approach that is mediated by the categories of fundamental ontological transformation “in Christ.” Taking issue with the trend represented by the autonomy of morality and Kantian transcendentalism, this current of thought sees itself as the custodian and interpreter of the most genuine conciliar appeals for a more vital

relation to scripture,²⁵ and strives to ensure a strong dogmatic foundation for moral theology.

For Domenic Capone²⁶ the ultimate reason for the theological extrinsicism of both the manualist tradition and autonomous ethics is found in a reification of human action into discrete acts that are cut off from the ontological depths of the person. To enter further into the depths of the concrete reality of the moral act means to return once again to the fontal density of “being in its personal mode” (*essere di persona*). On the basis of the scholastic axiom *agere sequitur esse*, Capone maintains that the decisive foundation of moral theology can be found in the ontology of the person, who has become a new creature “in Christ.” The relation between the indicative of grace (“you are new creatures”) and the imperative of morality (“walk therefore in newness of life”) cannot be interpreted as a relation between transcendental motivation and the autonomous determination of norms at the categorical level. It is instead a relation between an “intensive presence” at the level of being, and of its existential expression at the level of action.

For Réal Tremblay²⁷ the theological nucleus that allows us to overcome the antinomy between an autonomous morality and a faith-based ethics, which share the same reduction of the mystery of Christ, is found in the proposal of a christic anthropology that recognizes the son of God made man as the “absolute source of human existence.” Thus overcoming the narrowness of casuistry and its successors, moral theology must be reformulated on the basis of the fundamental ethical question, which in its original fullness is the question of the identity of man himself. The human act is moral to the extent that it corresponds to being. In this respect, the Chalcedonian dogma, which enables us to conceive of the unconfused union

²⁵For a detailed and critical overview of the literature and of the problems inherent in christocentrism in moral theology within the field of New Testament biblical theology, see: G. Segalla, *Introduzione all’etica biblica del Nuovo Testamento. Problemi e storia* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1989).

²⁶Cf. D. Capone, *L’uomo è persona in Cristo. Introduzione antropologica alla teologia morale* (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1971); “Cristocentrismo in teologia morale,” in *Morale e redenzione* (Roma: Edacalf, 1983), 65–94.

²⁷R. Tremblay, *L’ «Homme» qui divinise. Pour une interprétation christocentrique de l’existence* (Montréal: Éd. Paulines, 1993); *Cristo e la morale in alcuni documenti del Magistero* (Roma: Dehoniane, 1996); *Radicati e fondati nel Figlio. Contributi per una morale di tipo filiale* (Roma: Dehoniane, 1997).

of the human and divine natures in Christ, also provides the foundation for an anthropology of communion between the *humanum* and the *divinum*, which reaches its peak in the filial dimension of freedom. Christ thus enters into the most profound ontological depths of the believer, and conforms the believer to his own being. In this way, Christ inscribes himself within the ray of light that he has cast upon the human intelligence from all eternity as the creating Word, bringing the creature's conscience to its completion as a filial conscience.²⁸

Here we have the formulation of the second characteristic element of this model of christocentrism: the mediation of the conscience. For Capone, it is the profound conscience that arises in being in Christ that becomes normative in the encounter with the "*kairòs*" of the particular circumstances of life. Here a creative synthesis of objectivity and subjectivity occurs, from the demands that follow from the existence of the new creature and from the inescapable particularity of the call of circumstances. In this sense, the Redemptorist from Naples interprets the Alfonsian postulate in relation to the practical primacy of conscience with respect to the law: it does not deny the reference to universal norms, but it maintains that the formally practical and ultimately binding dimension is founded only at the level of the personal conscience. Tremblay does not enter directly into this level of the debate, but sets into relief the constitutively filial characteristic of Christian conscience, through which the believer participates in the creative Wisdom and perceives the Son's call to follow.

The theological proposals of these two Alfonsian moral theologians no doubt represent a significant contribution toward overcoming theological extrinsicism in relation to action. They jointly make progress toward an integral, personalistic approach to action, going well beyond the extrinsicist fragmentation of action in casuistry. What they offer is an "ontological christocentrism," which in turn presupposes a normative passage to action mediated by the conscience. Here we stand before an understanding of conscience that is more profound and comprehensive than the one we find in the manualist tradition. Nevertheless, this ontological development of anthropology, in our opinion, still remains at the threshold of the

²⁸Cf. R. Tremblay, *Cristo e la morale*, 37–71. [The term "*coscienza*," rendered here as "conscience," also means "consciousness" or "awareness."—Tr.]

dynamism of action and of the unique perspective of practical rationality. The foundation of christocentrism on the ontological plane needs to be complemented by a penetration into the dynamic structure of action from the perspective of the acting subject. Without this further development, the christocentrism threatens to fall short of completeness, or, as we find in particular in the thought of Capone, there remains a certain ambiguity that is not exempt from the danger of possible subjectivistic implications at the level of concrete application.

5. *Christ, the “Personal and Concrete Norm”*

The final line of reflection, which we can mention only in a general way, originates not so much from the sphere of moral theology as from that of dogmatics. Such an “intrusion” into the moral sphere can be explained by the preoccupations of the tendencies that dominated the Catholic moral theology scene in the seventies and eighties. The heavy emphasis on the rational and universal character of morality, the adoption of a Kantian notion of autonomy, and the prevalent attention granted to the human behavioral sciences led to a bracketing, if not an outright elimination, of the specifically Christian element in morality. What occurred was a “secularization of morality,” which was cut off from the determinative influence of faith: its epistemological character as a specifically theological science was undermined in both its sources and its method. This is why dogmatic theologians such as Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger, Angelo Scola, Georges Chantraine and Inos Biffi, were persuaded to take up questions of morality on the basis of a 1974 study of the International Theological Commission.²⁹ To be sure, they did not elaborate grand systematic proposals;

²⁹H.U. von Balthasar, *Neuf thèses pour une éthique chrétienne*, Enchiridion Vaticanum 5 (1974–1976) (Bologna: Dehoniane, 1979), 613–45; J. Ratzinger, *La via della fede. Le ragioni dell’etica nell’epoca presente*, (Milano: Ares, 1996); A. Scola, *Questioni di antropologia teologica*, part 2: “Fondamenti per l’agire morale del cristiano,” 83–151; G. Chantraine and A. Scola, “L’événement Christ et la morale,” in *Anthropotes* 3/1 (1987): 5–13; I. Biffi, *Integralità cristiana e fondazione morale*, 115 (1987): 570–90; Idem., “Fondazione teologico-cristologica-ecclesiological della morale,” in *Persona, verità e morale. Atti del Congresso Internazionale di Teologia Morale (Roma, 7–12 aprile 1986)* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1987), 27–35.

rather, they contributed essays that were meant to outline general principles or to provoke discussions and open up perspectives among professional moral theologians. As an example, we will consider Hans Urs von Balthasar's *Nine Theses on Christian Ethics*, which recommends itself, because of its undisputed authoritativeness, as a spearhead for a decisively christocentric answer to the question of moral theology.

The great Swiss theologian affirms at the outset that "the Christian who lives by faith is obliged to motivate his ethical action in the light of his faith." And, since the content of this faith is Christ, "the Christian will make the decisive choices of his life from the perspective of Christ." In the first thesis, Christ is presented as the "concrete norm," the "concrete categorical imperative." The accent is placed wholly on the fact that what we are dealing with is not a formal and abstract norm, but one that is "personal and concrete," which is for all that no less "universal." The crucial point of Balthasar's position is the simultaneous affirmation of universality and historical concreteness, founded on the person of Jesus. This simultaneity is due to the fact that he lived his eternal filial obedience to the will of the Father in the context of a human existence entirely like our own. Thus, his concrete existence, with all its historical particularity, becomes the unsurpassable normative form for the moral life of the Christian. In this way, the central confession of faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God made man, constitutes as well the foundational theological principle for moral theology.

The category by which we can interpret and elaborate the connection between Christ and moral life is "norm," in line with the dominant modern, and particularly Kantian, type of ethics.³⁰ One might say that Balthasar accepts the challenge of the Kantians, joining battle with them on their own turf, i.e., the universal rationality required by morality, the inwardly-binding rule separated from, and set against, the subject's inclinations. At the same time, he intends precisely to distinguish himself both from Kantian ethics and from its more recent transcendental incarnations, well aware as he is of the dangers of abstraction and formalism typical of a law-based ethics, which gets transformed into practical reason's inadmissible pretensions to total autonomy (thesis no. 6). This happens when the

³⁰Cf. G. Abbà, *Quale impostazione per la filosofia morale? Ricerche di filosofia morale* 1 (Roma: Las, 1996), 222–25.

law turns into an abstract absolute, cut off from a relationship with the living God, who is the author of the law and who gives it to man in the context of the covenant.³¹ Kantianism is therefore, according to Balthasar, the end result of the Pharisaical temptation, self-justification before the law.

The ambiguity that arises from founding ethics on the law finds resolution only in the personal figure of Christ, the “concrete”—but not formal—“categorical imperative.” In him, a relationship to the norm is immediately also a relationship to the author of the norm, who gives himself in a personal way. Thus, in Christ, we also find the answer to a further great problem: the dialectical opposition between autonomy and heteronomy, which played itself out in post-Kantian ethics. “In Christ” the law is manifest as an expression of the Father’s will and can be embraced as part of the relationship of filial obedience. In the garden of Olives, Jesus perceives the will of the Father as “other,” but he makes it his own in love: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me! But not according to my will, but according to yours!” (Mt 26:39). In the Spirit gratuitously given to us by Christ as a participation in his divine life, but acknowledging the insurmountable creaturely difference (he remains “*heteron*”), man can also be taken up into that singular relationship of adopted sonship that transfigures personal otherness (*heteros*) into loving reciprocity. In the Spirit of Jesus, the commandment is referred back to the Father and, interiorized in love, it becomes the new law, even if the aspect of exteriority cannot be totally eliminated while we remain on this earth.

Balthasar’s moral christocentrism consists therefore in the referring of the whole system of laws consistently to the one living and personal law which is Christ: in him, the demands of universality (he is the Word, the eternal Wisdom of the Father) and of concrete personal history (he is Jesus of Nazareth) converge into one. Thus, morality ultimately comes back to our participation, in the Spirit, in the filial obedience of Christ to the Father. The brief and dense essay by the theologian of Luzern offers a potent dogmatic provocation to moral theology, proposing that it be founded christologically within a trinitarian and personalistic context.

³¹For a recent, valuable exploration of the theme from a biblical perspective, see P. Beauchamp, *La loi de Dieu* (Paris: Seuil), 1999.

A more debatable implication of this essay is the use of the concept of “norm” as the mediating category, which the modern tradition has seemingly taken for granted in moral discourse. It is also true that the strong theological context in which Balthasar immerses the category “breaks open” the usual conception of norm, freeing it from its limitations: it is used within the personalistic perspective of a filial anthropology and is interpreted in the Spirit as an interior law of love. Nevertheless, there remains the limitation of a category that in and of itself can justify only an extrinsic conformity of the Christian’s acts to the action of Christ. Balthasar presents this approach, thus, more as a provocation and a proposal, which does not yet enter into the logic proper to practical reason. One might say, perhaps, that his proposal is too “theological” and yet too little “moral,” in the sense that it leaves a task unfinished and therefore entrusted to the moral theologian, namely, the task of penetrating into the specifics of the fundamental categories that would provide a foundation for an adequate interpretation of the dynamism of action, renewing them in the light of the christocentric principle.

In his book, *Living in Christ*, Carlo Caffarra presents the first vigorous attempt to transpose Balthasar’s dogmatic perspective into a moral key.³² Here, Caffarra gives an account of the implications of christocentrism for the moral life on three levels: at the level of foundation, of normative mediation, and of effective realization in action. On the basis of the predestination of every man to be conformed to the image of the Son, Caffarra establishes the dynamic ordering of moral theology to Christ as follows: “the Christian ethic is the full truth of the human ethic as such.”³³

Inspired by Balthasar’s proposal, the movement from foundation to decision is objectively mediated by the concept of norm, attributed to Jesus Christ himself. On the plane of action this implies a conformity that, by means of an “analogy of proportionality,”³⁴ starts from an imitation of internal attitudes and ends by giving shape even to external acts. The level of concrete realization is formulated as a reflection on human freedom: freedom bears the moral norm as something inscribed within itself, as a condition of its truth, but it

³²C. Caffarra, *Viventi in Cristo* (Milano: Jaca Book, 1981).

³³*Ibid.*, 57.

³⁴*Ibid.*

becomes effective only when freedom is set free by Christ. The grace of the Spirit enters into human dynamisms and renews them, taking into itself all the psycho-physical energies of the person and ordering them to love.³⁵ In the form of moral theology that Caffarra articulates, both dimensions—the fundamental ontological moment and the moment of normative exemplarity—are joined together, but they are united within the dynamic perspective of freedom. This latter intuition, in fact, holds the most originality and promise for moral christocentrism. It allows us to get beyond any residual extrinsicism that lingers in this model, in the dichotomy between objective norm and subjective norm, between law and conscience.

6. Outlook and Overview

To conclude this overview of the principal models of christocentrism in moral theology, which of course remains unavoidably too schematic,³⁶ we can finally try to give a theoretical evaluation and to sketch out possible directions for future reflection.³⁷ One thing we can affirm with certainty is that the proposal of christocentrism has always been radically challenged by the objection originally raised by the Enlightenment, and echoed in a substantial sense in the theory that makes morality autonomous. Though the horizons within which this objection occurs are admittedly narrow and restrictive, the questions it raises cannot be dismissed, and they demand a response. In relation to the method-

³⁵Ibid., 115–35.

³⁶Among the various other proposals, we may refer to at least two, which are significant because they are moving in a certain sense toward a virtue-theory centered in Christ, which is the perspective we have been advancing here, even if the fundamental schema remains that of the conscience-law relation or the ontologically founded model. R. Garcia de Haro, *Cristo fundamento de la moral*, (Barcelona: Eiusa, 1990); J.G. Ziegler, “Christozentrische Sittlichkeit—christusförmige Tugenden,” in *Trier. Theol. Zeitschrift* 96 (1987): 290–312.

³⁷The comprehensive theological context of this reflection is sketched out in a programmatic writing of the Area di Ricerca on the state of moral theology, of the Pontifical Institute John Paul II of the Lateran University in Rome: L. Melina, J. Pérez Soba, and J. Noriega, “Tesi e questioni circa lo statuto della teologia morale fondamentale,” in *Anthropotes* 15/1 (1999): 261–74.

ological requirements of moral theology, as we have seen, these questions concern universality and the interiority of the moral obligation.

a) *The integration of the rational dimension
into christocentrism*

The first part of the question concerns, of course, how we integrate reason within the theological perspective of christocentrism. The problem raised has shown to have, in turn, at least two implications: first, regarding how we understand christocentrism, and second, regarding the recognition of the originality of the epistemological status of moral knowledge.

The initial phase of christocentric reflection revealed the limitations of a purely “material” approach, i.e., one that contents itself with bringing Christ in as a new content, or even the only content, of moral theology, thus tying moral theology to christology. The risk of such christomonism is that it fails to answer questions concerning practice, it is unable to give an account of concrete moral experience and therefore to dialogue with other ethical proposals on the level of the *humanum*. The lesson we must draw is that christocentrism has to be understood as a comprehensive way of viewing the dynamism of Christian action; it is more a *way* of seeing than an exclusive object of vision.

In this respect, however, it also requires a widening of horizon: Christ, in his humanity as the only begotten son of God, is presented as “the way” that leads to the Father and as a principle of the outpouring of the Spirit. Both of these aspects of the being of Christ favor a special emphasis on Wisdom.³⁸ In his person, in his gestures and in his teaching, Jesus of Nazareth reveals the divine Wisdom, which orders the created universe and stands at the foundation of the Law: the encounter with him, in his individual humanity, gives us contact with the Word who comes into the

³⁸Cf. On this subject, see B. Petrà, “Gesù, maestro di sapienza. Un ‘altro’ approccio all’universalità etica del messaggio cristiano,” in *Rivista di teologia morale* 124/4 (1999): 487–93. This intervention was offered in the context of a “forum” the review devoted to the theme of The First CATI Congress: “*Gesù di Nazareth e la morale*.” It also includes interventions by M. Vidal, G. Piana and L. Lorenzetti (467–500).

world and illumines every man (cf. Jn 1:9). Moreover, in Christ crucified and risen, the Spirit is poured forth, who guides creation to its eschatological fulfillment in the kingdom (cf. Rm 8). The Spirit, with his gifts, has the mission of universalizing in time and space the event of Christ, bringing him into contact with every man and fructifying the works of those who welcome him.

On the other hand, an adequate integration of the rational moment within the theological context requires us to overcome reciprocal extrinsicism, one of the decisive elements of which is an intellectualist conception of moral knowledge.³⁹ Such a vision, typical of neo-scholasticism, is grounded in a notion of liberty that favors extrinsicism over knowledge of truth. In this perspective, the unique character of the knowledge of “truth of the good” is badly misunderstood. In reality, this truth calls upon man in his depths and thus involves the whole of his being from the very beginning: it thus concerns, not only his reason, but also his freedom and his affectivity. “He who does the truth comes into the light” (Jn 3:21).

We thus come to see the inadequacy of the late scholastic and neo-scholastic interpretation of the maxim “*agere sequitur esse*,” which in essence affirms that one can deduce the norms of action from a metaphysical analysis of human nature, carried out by speculative reason.⁴⁰ *Operari sequitur esse* is an ontological and not a gnoseological principle. Knowledge of the good (the moral good, as distinct from the ontological good), which needs to be attained in freedom, is a knowledge unique to practice, which occurs in the unique interior experience the subject has of himself in action. The cognitive moment is taken up into the dynamics of action: we come to know the moral good, which is the end that corresponds to freedom, within action itself. In this respect, practical reason is not to be understood as a mere application of speculative knowledge, but

³⁹See also, on this point, my contribution “‘Verità sul bene,’ Razionalità pratica, etica filosofica e teologia morale: Da *Veritatis splendor* a *Fides et ratio*,” in *Anthropotes* 15/1 (1999): 125–43.

⁴⁰On the relationship between metaphysics and ethics, see J. de Finance, *Aux sources de la métaphysique et de la morale*, (1978), now in: *L'ouverture et la norme. Questions sur l'agir humain* (Città del Vaticano: LEV, 1989), 111–38; W. Kluxen, *Philosophische Ethik bei Thomas von Aquin*, 2nd expanded ed. (Hamburg: F. Meiner, 1980).

as a specific mode of knowing the good, which arises from within the dynamism in which the subject is attracted to the good.⁴¹

Therefore, as Aquinas affirms, theological knowledge lies beyond the distinction between the speculative and practical exercise of reason.⁴² This becomes all the more apparent in a christocentric approach to revelation, which, particularly with the help of the constitution *Dei Verbum* from Vatican II, has also rediscovered the personal dimension of this approach.⁴³

Moreover, we also see the possibility of a fruitful encounter between the theme of prudence, the virtue that perfects practical reason, and Christian wisdom. The modern, post-tridentine tradition was structured around the law-conscience couplet,⁴⁴ which, by viewing action within the limits of obligation (licit, illicit, and permitted), retained a fundamental extrinsicism in its understanding of the moral law; the more ancient tradition, by contrast, which can be traced to the Fathers of the Church and which received its systematic expression in Thomas Aquinas, founds Christian morality on the virtues and, in particular, on prudence, a virtue that participates internally in the performance of the act, ordering the act to its perfection.⁴⁵ This perspective shows its originality in the affirmation that the determining factor in the constitution of concrete action is the actual attraction of the good, to which one assents through the moral virtues.

⁴¹See also L. Melina, *La conoscenza morale. Linee di riflessione sul Commento di san Tommaso all'Etica Nicomachea* (Roma: Città Nuova, 1987).

⁴²Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I, 1, 4.

⁴³Cf. I. de la Potterie, "La vérité de la Sainte Écriture et l'histoire du salut d'après la Constitution dogmatique *Dei Verbum*," in *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 88 (1966): 149–69; Idem., "La vérité de l'Écriture et l'herméneutique biblique," in *Revue Théologique de Louvain* 18 (1987): 171–86.

⁴⁴See, for instance, the preface to a major work: "Duplex est regula actuum humanorum: una dicitur remota, altera proxima. Remota, sive materialis est lex divina, proxima vero, sive formalis, est conscientia" [There are two rules of human acts: one is said to be remote, the other proximate. The remote, or material, rule is the divine law. The truly proximate, or formal, rule is the conscience]. Saint Alfonso Maria de Liguori, *Theologia moralis*, liber I, tractatus I, caput I, 1, 9 (Milano: Typis Guglielmini, 1849).

⁴⁵Cf. S. Pinckaers, "Coscienza, verità e prudenza," in *La coscienza. Conferenza Internazionale patrocinata dallo "Wethersfield Institute" di New York (Orvieto, 27–28 maggio 1994)*, ed. G. Borgonovo (Città del Vaticano: LEV, 1996), 126–41.

In this way the theological dimension of Christ, who is Wisdom, can be welcomed and granted its full value as the primary and integrating principle of moral theology. In fact, in the economy of the new law, he is “*maxime sapiens et amicus*,” according to the noted Thomistic affirmation,⁴⁶ precisely insofar as he is the highest personal good that attracts us; by virtue of his intrinsic beauty, he wins us over by his power and by the fascination of the communion with God that he offers to us. The gift of wisdom, which comes from friendship with God,⁴⁷ both orders action to its final end, and at the same time casts a light on the particular actions that must be done along the way, thus including and perfecting prudence.

Because of Christ, who is the way to the Father, the ultimate end of human action is communion with the Father:⁴⁸ this end has an effect on the very structure of action, conferring a unity upon it without for all that eliminating the rational moment of prudence. Thus, charity brings about a new integration of prudence and of all the rational principles of action, showing their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. According to a profoundly christocentric expression from *Veritatis splendor*: “he is the principle who, having assumed human nature, casts a decisive light on it, in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of love for God and neighbor” (53).

The natural law and the law revealed through the old covenant show themselves to be partial foreshadowings and prophecies of the “living and personal law” that is Christ. The natural law and the commandments of the old covenant have their original locus in the Christic totality wherein they find their foundation and their definitive hermeneutic, insofar as they are brought to completion in love, the fullness of the law.

The dynamic of charity allows us therefore to preserve the abiding value of natural inclinations and, at the same time, to transcend them. Love for life is revealed from within the context of the gift of self. Conjugal, sexual love is interpreted as a sacramental sign of God’s love for man and Christ’s love for his Bride, the Church. At the same time, a new way of transcending sexual love

⁴⁶Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, 108, 4.

⁴⁷P.J. Wadell, *Friends of God. Virtues and Gifts in Aquinas* (New York: Peter Lang, 1991).

⁴⁸See also L. Melina, “Agire per il bene della comunione,” in *Anthropotes* 15/2 (1999).

opens up in virginity for the sake of the kingdom of heaven, which confirms the meaning of the vocation of spousal self-gift but no longer actualizes this meaning in the sign of sexual relations. The social order, with its law of justice, is superseded in love, which, without neglecting the natural demands of equity, integrates them into the context of communion, a prefiguration of the Church. Finally, the search for truth encounters Christ, the truth made flesh: the gift of faith does not eliminate seeking and its rational demands, but orders it to a continual deepening that never comes to an end.⁴⁹

*b) The integration of christocentrism
into the dynamism of action*

The second aspect of the question of christocentrism in morality concerns the problematic of *the interiority of moral obligation*, rooted in Christ. This calls for the integration of a christocentric approach into the very logic of action. In relation to the categories used to interpret human action, which play a mediating role in the various models of christocentrism, we seem to be able to discern three basic types, based on the concepts of “norm” of “cause” and of “end,” respectively.

We often find the category of “norm” in modern approaches to morality, which consider action from a third-person perspective. Morality here gets defined as the conformity of the exterior action with the moral rule.⁵⁰ A christocentrism that relies on this interpretation of moral action will have recourse to the concepts of “example,” “imitation,” and “model.” We might call it a “christocentrism of the norm,” even if this norm happens to be personal, existential, and concrete. The limitation of this version of christocentrism can be seen in the lingering extrinsicism in the way Christ is related to

⁴⁹Here, I have taken up some reflections from my forthcoming volume, L. Melina, *Sharing in Christ's Virtues: For a Renewal of Moral Theology in Light of "Veritatis splendor"* (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2001).

⁵⁰See also the classic study by D. Prümmer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis secundum principia S. Thomae Aquinatis*, I, II, cap. III, a. 1, n. 9 (Freiburg, i. Br.: Herder, 1935), 67–68, which interprets morality as an accidental property of external action, deriving from its relation to the law.

action, insofar as action is here grasped from the outside, and only in a second moment related to its paradigm.

The model based on the category of “cause” tries to overcome this limitation. Here, the analysis of the chosen action is of a metaphysical character; it is carried out from the perspective of being rather than from the dynamic and practical perspective of freedom. Being in Christ, insofar as it represents a new ontology of the moral subject, is interpreted as an efficient cause of action. This position could be characterized as a “christocentrism of a transformed ontology.” Such an approach is, on the whole, significant with respect to the necessary anthropological presupposition of moral theology, but to the extent that it claims to be a sufficient elaboration of morality, it reveals its limitation: it is in itself incomplete, and if it ends up entrusting the determination of moral obligations entirely to the creative conscience, it becomes subjectivistic.

A third model of christocentrism, however, would base itself on a teleological interpretation of action. Here, the preferred perspective is that of the subject, who strives for self-fulfillment through his actions. The approach to morality, in this case, is not that of external regulation by means of norms, nor is it the metaphysical perspective of ontological causality; rather, it is an approach based on “ends,” which set in motion the practical dynamism of freedom. Human praxis is seen as a striving ordered to the fulfillment of an end immanent to the acting subject (*eu-prasia*: good life). From the theological point of view, human action presents itself as a free cooperation in the fulfillment of God’s work of creation and redemption in Christ. This work is the perfection of man himself, his perfect happiness, which is at the same time also the glorification of God (*perfectio sui et glorificatio Dei*).

On the other hand, the supernatural and gratuitous character of this final end does not allow the dynamics of action to limit itself to a purely immanent unfolding, but compels it to transcend itself. Christian moral theology will necessarily acquire a personalistic and responsorial character: it will arise as a response to the totally gratuitous encounter with Christ. Only in him, in fact, do we awaken to a unique superabundance, one that we cannot foresee and yet in a surprising way corresponds to human desire. And the fundamental human response to the encounter cannot but have the character of a conversion to the person of Christ, in such a way that his divine action is received into our human action.

The task that falls to moral theology will therefore be to reflect on how this collaboration between man and God can come about in free action. Christocentrism is here realized at a properly moral level, as a reflection on Christ as the interior principle, who, through the help of the Spirit, animates the dynamism of human action.⁵¹ In this case, we will have a “christocentrism of action” more than of being, one in which the constitutive principles of action (the faculties of reason and will, the passions, the habits and the virtues, law and grace) are assumed and transformed by a new formal principle.

The threefold characterization of the christocentric models of moral theology corresponds in a remarkable way to the threefold modality by which Cardinal Giacomo Biffi characterizes the relationship between Christ and the concrete universe, on the basis of the analysis of the christological hymn of Col 1:15-20.⁵² Christ, center of the cosmos and of history, can be seen as the “efficient cause,” through whom (*dià*) all things were created; or, instead, as the “exemplary cause,” in whom (*en*) all of reality finds its original ideal form; or finally as the “final cause,” towards whom (*eis*) all things strive in a dynamism ordered to fulfillment. Of course, each of these christocentric perspectives is legitimate, fruitful and appropriate from the point of view of a speculative theology of the Mystery. In light of our reflections up to this point, however, the third seems especially to recommend itself, insofar as it corresponds most adequately to the formal point of view of ethics. But how is it possible to bring together the personalistic dimension and its implications with all of the valid elements found in the other approaches?

7. Conclusion: Towards a Christocentrism of Virtue and of Excellent Action

We find an initial response to this question in an extraordinarily suggestive commentary by St. Thomas on the Pauline text of

⁵¹Cf. J. Noriega, “Lo Spirito Santo e l’azione umana,” in *Domanda sul bene e domanda su Dio*, ed. L. Melina and J. Noriega (Roma: PUL-Mursia, 1999), 233–47.

⁵²G. Biffi, *Approccio al cristocentrismo*, 62–74.

Phil 1:3: “*mihi vivere Christus est.*”⁵³ Life, Aquinas affirms, is characterized by movement: in fact those beings are said to be living that have in themselves the principle of their own movement. Christ therefore can be called the life of man, insofar as he is in us the principle of movement, which is our life. And human life is movement through the mediation of the acts by means of which we direct ourselves toward the goal wherein we find our perfection. Now, Christ moves our life and is the principle of our actions by being the end that we love and desire. It follows that Christ is the principle of our life, insofar as it is the love for him that moves us in each of the actions that we perform. What the commentary from Thomas cited above indicates is the perspective of the free dynamism of man, who is oriented by love for his end, and who lives his actions as steps along the road to its realization.

Two fruitful paths of research thus open up for exploration: on the one hand, there is the path that could emerge from an encounter between the theological appeal to christocentrism and personalism, and on the other hand the trend in recent philosophical ethics that has proposed a recovery of virtue theory.⁵⁴

Now, Christ does not move me in the way Aristotle’s Unmoved Mover moves the cosmos; instead, I move toward him because he has first moved toward me and, by giving himself to me, he has provoked my love. What comes into view in this case is a specifically personal modality of the dynamic influence on action, which is different from the three modalities mentioned above. It is a *personal* causality, understood in the light of the philosophy of personalism, and given a metaphysical grounding.⁵⁵ This is the

⁵³Aquinas, *Super Epistolam ad Philippenses Lectura*, cap. I, lect. III, (Torino: Marietti, 1953), n. 32.

⁵⁴For a general overview of this tendency and some basic bibliographical indications see: G. Abbà, “L’originalità dell’etica delle virtù,” in *Virtù dell’uomo e responsabilità storica. Originalità, nodi critici e prospettive attuali della ricerca etica della virtù*, ed. F. Compagnoni and L. Lorenzetti (San Paolo: Cinisello B., 1998), 135–65. Moreover, see S. Pinckaers, “Rediscovering Virtue,” in *The Thomist* 60/3 (1996): 361–78.

⁵⁵It was above all M. Nédoncelle who developed this point in *Personne humaine et nature. Étude logique et métaphysique* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1963). See also: J.J. Pérez Soba Díez del Corral, “¿Personalismo o moralismo? La respuesta de la metafísica de la comunión. Alcance del análisis de Maurice Nédoncelle,” in *El primado de la persona en la moral contemporánea. XVII Simposio Internacional de Teología*

unique way that an impact is made on freedom from within interpersonal relationships.

In love, which is both the source and summit of moral action, we are able therefore to posit Christ's initial personal communication of the love of Christ, who, in giving himself, provokes a response on the part of the human being. We may thus reformulate the scholastic axiom, in a specifically moral context, as follows: *agere sequitur amari* (action follows upon being loved). In this respect, we catch sight of the possibility of a personal notion of causality, which comprehends the other forms of causality mentioned above—in the first place, final causality, but guided by it, also exemplary and efficient causality—and includes them within a harmonious order according to the logic proper to morality.

For what concerns a virtue-ethics, then, it is not simply a matter of re-evaluating or adding another, rather neglected, chapter to the books on moral theology, but of rediscovering the unique approach of the first person or of the acting subject, who, in the concreteness and the complexity of his various activities, is ordered toward the good, toward an ideal of the good life, which fulfills his aspirations. Virtues, in this context, represent the intrinsic principles that ensure that human action be excellent. Of course, moral theology will need to scrutinize the quality of the virtue theory on which it bases itself. Only by grounding its theory in rational principles will virtue discourse be able to avoid slipping into cultural conventionalism and relativism. The recent studies devoted to a recovery of the authentic Thomistic doctrine of the virtues offer a reliable point of departure.⁵⁶

de la Universidad de Navarra (Pamplona, 17–19 de abril de 1996), Servicio de Publicaciones de la Universidad de Navarra, dir. A. Sarmiento, E. Molina (Col. «Simposios Internacionales de Teología», n. 17) (Pamplona, 1997), 281–92.

⁵⁶It is appropriate to at least cite the following work: G. Abbà, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, 2nd expanded ed. (Roma: Las, 1995); M. Rhonheimer, *Praktische Vernunft und Vernünftigkeit der Praxis. Handlungstheorie bei Thomas von Aquin in ihrer Entstehung aus dem Problemkontext der aristotelischen Ethik*, (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 1994); Idem., *La prospettiva della morale. Fondamenti dell'etica filosofica* (Roma: Armando, 1994); A. Rodriguez Luño, *La scelta etica. Il rapporto tra libertà e virtù* (Milano: Ares, 1988); P.J. Wadell, *The Primacy of Love. An Introduction to the Ethics of Thomas Aquinas* (New York: Paulist Press, 1992). Extremely interesting, although of another inspiration and of a highly meditative character: G. Angelini, *Le virtù e la fede* (Milano: Glossa, 1994).

Moreover, virtue discourse must be completed with reference to excellent action. Indeed, the concept of action is richer and more complete than that of virtue; the virtues, on the other hand, are habitual dispositions that predispose one to act, but do not substitute for action. Here, an integrative approach opens up that is particularly significant for christocentrism, namely, an approach based on the beatitudes.⁵⁷ St. Thomas interprets these within the dynamic context of action, not as norms to follow, nor as fixed states, but as excellent acts, through which man in the present life begins his approach to the final beatitude, a foretaste of which is already given to him in action. This is possible because these acts are a participation in the action of Christ: the disciple, in the sequela Christi, enters with his action into communion with the action of Christ and, in the paradox of an apparent defeat, bears already in himself the joy of victory and the hope of its full attainment.

The possibility and fecundity of an encounter between christocentrism, personalism, and the moral perspective of the virtues and excellent action is therefore dependent upon the coherent integration of three elements, which I will enumerate in a summary and programmatic fashion to conclude this study:

1) *The adoption of the perspective of the first person, or the subject in action, which integrates the unique dynamism of human action ordered to the good.* The intrinsic principles of action that require emphasis in this approach are the virtues, the gifts of the Spirit, and the Beatitudes. The recent rediscovery of St. Thomas's moral theory will likely help to overcome the limitations of modern ethics.

2) *The recognition of the personalistic dimension of moral theology.*⁵⁸ This concerns an aspect that was not thematically developed in the scholastic tradition, but is characteristic of modern and contemporary thought. The unique character of the moral good as a "good of the person," viewed from within the experience of the encounter and brought to completion in the communion of persons, and the

⁵⁷May I also recommend here an excellent doctoral thesis written under my direction at the John Paul II Institute in Rome, and soon to be published: O. Bonnewijn, *La béatitude et les béatitudes dans la Prima Secundae de la Somme Théologique de saint Thomas. Éléments pour une théologie morale de l'agir excellent.*

⁵⁸See: J. Pérez Soba, "Dall'incontro alla comunione: amore del prossimo e amore di Dio," in *Domanda sul bene*, 109–30; D.M. Gallagher, "Person and Ethics in Thomas Aquinas," in *Acta Philosophica* 4/1 (1995): 51–71.

centrality of love, are aspects that ought to characterize a moral theology renewed in the light of Vatican II and *Veritatis splendor*.

3) *The broadening of christocentrism in a trinitarian sense that would allow it to answer the need for universality and interiority.* This is rightly recalled by modern developments in ethics.—*Translated by William F. Murphy, Jr. and David Christopher Schindler.* □

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