

BOOK REVIEW

Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, c.s.sp *Richard A. McCormick and the Renewal of Moral Theology*. Notre Dame and London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995 Pp. xvi, 254.

The *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* contains the following remarkable passage:

The Church safeguards the deposit of God's Word, from which religious and moral principles are drawn. But it does not always have a ready answer to individual questions, and it wishes to combine the light of revelation with the experience of everyone in order to illuminate the road on which humanity has recently set out (*Gaudium et Spes*, No. 33).

Elsewhere, the Council called specifically for the improvement of moral theology (*Optatam Totius*, No. 16), with emphasis on the calling of the faithful in Christ and their obligation to produce fruit in love for the life of the world.

Paulinus Ikechukwu Odozor, c.s.sp. has given us a masterly account of one of the major contributors to this programme of renewal in his book, *Richard A. McCormick and the Renewal of Moral Theology*. This work is more than a straightforward account of McCormick's thought; it is a creative interpretation. The author highlights McCormick's major achievements. In a respectful, critical way, he draws attention to some perceived inadequacies in method and content. He also points to limitations in McCormick's world-view, which affect the value of his overall contribution. Odozor's final chapter offers suggestive clues about how moral theology might proceed in the future, in a more global setting and with more awareness of the variety of human cultures.

The Vatican Council wished to relativize the certainties of the manual tradition; to encourage respect for the authority of human experience; a greater awareness of the complexities and struggles of individual lives, a person-centred morality. The Council called for a greater tentativeness in moral judgements and a genuine dialogue between theology, the human sciences and the wider society.

All of these features of the renewal of moral theology are enshrined in the writings of Richard McCormick. However, McCormick was and is not a system-builder, but as he endearingly said of himself, a "fire-fighter". Odozor sets out to systematise his thought and to discover the vital clues to his overall achievement. This he does in seven chapters which deal with the central themes in McCormick's moral theology.

The first chapter contains a biographical sketch and a very interesting account of the manualist tradition in Catholic moral theology, in which McCormick was trained. This is followed by chapters on the nature of Christian ethics, the Church as moral teacher, Anthropology, proportionate reason, casuistry, and a final evaluation of McCormick's contribution to the renewal of moral theology. From

the beginning, the reader is made to feel confident in Odozor's grasp of a large body of source materials and his careful reading of texts.

Proportionate Reason

One of the most rewarding features of this book is the rigorous account of proportionate reason in chapter 5. This is pursued right from its beginnings in McCormick's doctoral dissertation, his questioning of the traditional distinction between direct and indirect voluntareity, the considerable influences of the Vatican Council and the later publication of *Humanae Vitae*. He was determined to move away from a style of thinking which placed disproportionate weight on the analysis of the external, physical act. His rejection of the concept of intrinsic evil as applied to contraception in the encyclical, is a vital clue to the hard core of McCormick's moral theology: the human person integrally and adequately considered is the basis for all moral evaluation. How does a particular act relate to the order of persons, to the hierarchy of values?

The intellectual upheaval caused by the birth control debate led McCormick to give increasing weight to teleological thinking. Odozor argues persuasively that proportionate reasoning is not a matter of simple, utilitarian calculus. For Richard McCormick, proportionate reasoning is part of the exercise of the virtue of prudence to protect the basic human goods as much as possible in a complex and often tragic moral environment. The issue is: what action is most likely to promote the good of the human person integrally and adequately considered? Central to all of this is a conflict in the *ordo bonorum* or hierarchy of values. The moral struggle is to respond to the demands of love in particular circumstances, and not simply seek what is licit.

McCormick insists that proportionate reason in a conflict situation is not a capricious factor imported into an act already defined; it constitutes its very object:

In other words, proportionate reason enters into the very definition of *what* one is doing. If one conceives proportionate reason as *in addition to an act already definable by its object*, then one does indeed get into some mischievous results..... (p.108).

In the light of official generalised condemnations of proportionalism in moral theology, the reader is encouraged to follow the argument step by step throughout chapter 5, and make up his or her own mind.

I have large reservations about the applicability of proportionate reasoning to political-moral decision making. I do not see how it can escape the charge of utilitarian calculus, finally determined by crude political necessity or *raison d'état*. Odozor addresses this issue in a highly significant passage, with direct references to McCormick:

.....Also justifying obliteration bombing, as Harry Truman did in Nagasaki and Hiroshima, in the understanding that it might end the war and thus save more lives in the long run, is to do serious injury to an associated good, liberty, because "making innocent (non-combatant) persons the object of our targeting is a form of extortion in international affairs that contains an implicit denial of human freedom." The bombing has no necessary connection to the good being sought. (p.115.)

The chain of proportionalist moral reasoning displayed here is chilling in its implications for moral decision making. The focus of moral attention is distracted from the immediate victims of the obliteration, the hundreds of thousands of innocent persons who were burnt live and died hideous deaths or were maimed for life, to the serious injury that will be done to the value of liberty, a necessary value in international life. The essential wrong-doing is to the human good, liberty (as distinct from the good of saving more lives), because obliteration-bombing is a form of extortion in international affairs, which threatens the good of human freedom.

If we apply proportionate reasoning consistently to this case, and for example, to the saturation-bombing of German cities in order to break civilian morale and so win the war more quickly (following a decision of the British war cabinet in 1940), then we have no coherent moral ground on which to identify and reject the intrinsic wickedness of the mass-slaughter of innocent non-combatants in war. As for the final sentence - "The bombing has no necessary connection to the good being sought" - this fragile conclusion will be briskly refuted by the politicians and military planners.

The Nature of Christian Ethics

Of special interest in this book is chapter 2 on the nature of Christian ethics. I would like to raise some questions provoked by this chapter, and by the final section summing up Richard McCormick's achievement. I may be permitted to conclude with some personal reflections stimulated by Odozor's work.

It is not possible in a review to do justice to the nuances of one of the liveliest debates in moral theology since Vatican II. However, McCormick's position on the nature of Christian ethics can be briefly stated. Christian faith does not add to the material content of morality, a fundamental mode of human experience, which can be discovered by human reason. Reason informed by faith is the key to his thinking. Christian faith has an influence in the shaping of the moral agent and the formation of the moral judgement. Faith affects human dispositions, intentions and goals. "It can transform our view of persons and their meaning as well as our style of performing the moral tasks common to all persons" (p.34). Odozor stresses, however, that for McCormick, insight from faith brings "confirmatory" rather than "originating" warrants to moral reflection:

The warrants of faith are confirmatory because they provide the Christian with a privileged articulation or objectification in Christ of what everyone does or can experience. (p.34).

McCormick insists that the warrants of faith are not originating because they do not and cannot add to human self-understanding any material content which is strange or foreign to man as he experiences himself in the world. It is just at this point that moral theology needs to be sharpened and rendered methodologically self-critical, by taking account of J.B. Metz's critique of the bourgeois, private individual, child of the Enlightenment:

He is the subject in the subject. He is concealed behind the rational autonomous man who has come of age in the modern era. He is finally also the creator of that form of religion which is used, as it were, to decorate and set the scene, freely and in private, for middle-class festivals and which has for a long time been current even in normal christianity. Theology, which believes that it is bound to defend the contemporary human subject uncritically as a religious subject, is, in this perspective, simply a late reflection of this middle-class religion. (Metz, *Faith in History and Society*, p.33.)

What the individual, possibly a large wage-earner in a multi-national arms company, "does or can experience", is crucially influenced by the liberal capitalist society in which he has discovered his ethical self. Elsewhere, Odozor makes some telling points about the limits of McCormick's North American and European outlook.

What "everyone does or can experience" is socially and politically determined. There is much more at stake here than the limits of human finiteness. Over the past twenty years or so, the Church's articulation of the preferential options for the poor (taken up at various levels in the official Magisterium), necessarily implies a radically new way of experiencing oneself in the world. The option for the poor is grounded in the fundamental salvific truth that the God revealed in the Judaeo-Christian tradition identifies himself with the weak, the oppressed, and the crucified. In a violent, unjust world, the full reception of this truth may lead to new material content in human ethical self-understanding. This will be strange and foreign to the experience of most citizens in the Northern hemisphere. The question of the distinctiveness of Christian ethics must be brought beyond issues of style and the manner of accomplishing the moral tasks common to everyone.

In concluding his chapter on Christian ethics, Odozor makes a very important point about the goal of moral striving. The manuals always related morality to the beatific vision, thus giving morality a clear focus. "In McCormick's understanding of moral theology, there is no room for such consciousness" (p.45). There is not much evidence of eschatological awareness, Odozor remarks. This is a significant lack in any Christian moral theology. It may be due to his concentration on the

individual moral agent and how he comes to discern right and wrong in a complex world. Moral theology, however, cannot rest with individual lives. It has to move from biography to history; the story of whole societies; moral struggle in a world of dependency and famine, bedevilled by the lethal profits from the arms trade. Moral theology on this wider stage would necessarily lead to a more satisfying account of moral striving.

In his final chapter, Odozor pays tribute to the great achievements of his subject. In particular, he records his part in the movement from an act-centred, sin-obsessed morality, to a morality built around the human person integrally and adequately considered. There is too, McCormick's large achievement in helping to place theology at the service of the entire faith community and the whole of humanity, in the quest for the common good.

Odozor is courteous but firm in listing the deficiencies in McCormick's theology as he sees them. "Closeness to the tradition ensures that one's theological agenda is dictated by developments within it" (p.172). This has its advantages but it has also given rise to some of the serious deficiencies in his work. He has given little attention to virtue ethics or the formation of the character of the agent; he has little awareness of variations of cultures within the Church. More seriously, he has hardly shown awareness of racism and the oppression of minorities (pp. 172-173). Odozor's verdict is that McCormick is too closely tied to the tradition and its concerns.

Recently, McCormick called for what he terms "a universalist moral theology" Odozor traces this search to his belief "that there is a core at which point human divisions into cultural, racial, or personal groupings disappear. It is thus the work of moral theology to speak to this core or to draw from it in order to appeal to the human" (p.173).

With all respect, I think that this rational quest for a politically neutral, common core of humanness is doomed to failure. It leads right back to the moral rationalism and universalism of the manuals, untouched by critical, historical consciousness. What seems to be missing is a critical hermeneutical perspective.

The Option for the Poor

John O'Brien, c.s.sp. in his *Theology and the option for the poor*,¹ has argued convincingly that a theology from the perspective of the option for the poor is constitutive of Christian theology. It occupies what he terms a relatively normative and privileged hermeneutical standpoint.

The massive catastrophic suffering of whole peoples in poverty and marginalization is more than a theological theme. Since salvation in Christ is historically mediated through the achievement of a new quality of human solidarity of which the poor are the privileged architects, involvement in the struggle of the poor is a condition of the lived faith, which seeks self-understanding in theology. (O'Brien, p.162)

The pope declared in an address to cardinals in Rome in 1985: "I have made and I do make this option. I identify myself with it. I feel it could not be otherwise, since it is the eternal message of the Gospel." The option is made for the exploited, those whose basic rights are violated, those whom society dismisses as "non-persons". One may speak here of a new stage in the self-understanding of the Christian tradition.

The evangelical urgency of the preferential option confronts us through the pope's words, through theological writings from the perspective of the poor, and through the lives of many humble Christians who have made the option themselves.

What is urgently needed is a systematic discussion of the essential meaning and precise ethical and political requirements of the option for the poor. The moral subject of the option includes the individual Christian, a local community, a religious congregation or the universal Church.²

Fr. Odozor has rightly acclaimed Richard McCormick's contribution to the paradigm shift in Catholic moral theology after Vatican II. As we approach the end of the century, the renewal of moral theology must assume a very different character. There is a need for precise moral reflection on the practical demands of a radical commitment to work with the poor for the sake of their liberation. One can only allude here to the nature of the task ahead:

Rather than simply extend charity universally, in an outward radiating series of concentric circles, the *preferential* option reverses the usual order of priorities whereby the nearest are given priority and needs of the most distant are secondary. Special devotion and priority is given to those to whom we are least bound by ties of affection, blood, class etc. This preference is rooted in God's own concern for the "least".³

On the evidence of the book under review, Paulinus Odozor is well-placed to make his own contribution to the continuing renewal of moral theology.

¹ John O'Brien, *Theology and the Option for the Poor*, Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1992

² I am indebted here to Stephen J. Pope, "The 'Preferential Option for the Poor' An Ethic for 'Saints and Heroes'?" *Irish Theological Quarterly*, No.3, 1993, pp.161-176.

³ Stephen Pope, loc.cit., p.163