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THE CATHOLIC HERITAGE

"A civilization is a heritage of beliefs, customs, and knowledge slowly accumulated in the course of centuries, elements difficult at times to justify by logic, but justifying themselves as paths when they lead somewhere, since they open up for man his inner distance."

Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Introductory Comments

What is the point of examining morality in a Catholic or even a broader Christian context? Who needs religion at all, and, especially, who needs a bunch of arbitrary rules given by old people who think they know better and who are not really in touch with a younger person's life and its challenges? People should be allowed to do what is right for them. I can make my own way.

These comments reflect attitudes common in the modern world and are certainly not unique to Catholic Christians. Today, most people are raised in a postreligious, secular environment. Even those who are brought up in a religious context may not see connections between their religion and their behavior. Americans are nourished with the mother's milk of individualism, suspicious of communal conclusions about right and wrong. Many see moral

choices as personal and disconnected from any organized faith. The designation "cafeteria Catholics" refers not only to selective appropriation of the tenets of faith but also to rules of behavior. And this notion is ubiquitous.

Where Do Morals Originate?

Moral activity is never done in a vacuum. It has history, content, and effects beyond one's self. Moral options originate in a belief system coupled with a set of goals—a story and a vision of what could be, even if decision makers would not define their choices in that way. How many young girls dress as Disney princesses for Halloween, mesmerized by the beautiful cartoon heroines? With the election of the first African American president, how many American parents have named a child "Barack," "Malia," or "Sasha" after the First Family? How many high school graduates choose careers patterned on some idealized model of a particular profession as seen on television or in their own lives? (Mom is a marvelous doctor, dad a great teacher. I want to be like mom or dad. People who work in law or forensics on TV have a cool life. I'd like to do that.) Choices—even core life choices—find their roots in some idea, story, or vision of what might be.

Each person's behavior contributes to context and produces effects beyond one's self. Every moral choice changes both the external and internal environment of the persons acting. Someone volunteers at a soup kitchen. That action makes life better for hungry people. That action makes the volunteer more

Former California First Lady Maria Shriver likes the "compassion and justice of Jesus Christ" advanced by her Catholic religion but can't abide the church's positions on gays, divorce, and a woman's right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, she reveals in a *Washington Post* interview. "I'm a cafeteria Catholic," she declares, referring to her habit of following only Catholic teachings she believes in.

compassionate toward the disadvantaged. Choices flow from who we are and what we wish to become.

What Is a Belief System?

The term *belief system* means more than an overtly religious commitment. It refers to any nexus of ideals and values a person embraces. A belief system, even a trivial one, offers *content* for moral action. It molds a person's *character*. Who we are influences how we behave. Parents teach children to be honest. People who value honesty do honest things. A particular culture teaches that persons are important. People who value human beings act in such a way as to promote humanity. People who learn to value money do whatever it takes to get more money. While a person's belief system may not seem religious or even necessarily consistent, it is the operative narrative that is the underlying director of moral choice.

Everyone has a moral rudder that guides choices. If we were to speak of concrete decisions as the visible tip of an iceberg, the remainder of the iceberg—that which sustains and supports decisions—is certainly there. It lurks undetected under the surface of human consciousness, directing decisions. More will be said about this in chapter 6. As we move from stable community settings like home or family, we experience systems of belief different from ours. The new environment may confuse or challenge us. Our moral rudder is swamped with waves of conflicting models about right and wrong.

Chapter 1 explores the importance of a stable moral context. First, it examines three elements we shall call *heritage*. Heritage includes narrative (story), tradition (growth and development), and community (support system). Second, the chapter considers the specific Catholic Christian heritage, which has endured as a useful tool for many centuries for millions of people. While today many question Catholicism's relevance (see chapter 3), it deserves consideration, particularly from those who profess the Catholic faith. Because it offers a morality that claims to transcend denominational lines, it may appeal also to those of other religions and even to those who are religious skeptics.

What Is Heritage?

The word *heritage* has multiple meanings. We will explore three. First, it is *what we are given* by family, religion, culture—the starting point for moral decision making. It is personal *identity*, who we are. Second, heritage may refer to what I do with what I am given, *what I make of myself* through my personal set of important stories, values, rules, and my actions. Third, heritage is preserved, tested, passed on, and sometimes amplified within a *community*. Communities grow and change, as do the persons who constitute them.

Identity: Who I Am

Many of the elements of who we are can be found hardwired in our deepest being. When as newborns we take our initial gulp of air, we imbibe the specific context into which we are born: the parents we have, the language and culture of our place in history. Each of us is given a story, one might say a "scripture," that forms the initial ground of our self-definition. Anyone who has traveled outside her country of origin or taken courses in a foreign language knows how diverse locations shape one's perspective and identity. Interpretation of traffic laws differs considerably from Rome, Georgia, to Rome, Italy. The former applies laws strictly; the latter has a much more laissez-faire or relaxed approach. *Pain* means something quite different in English from what it means in French.

There is a reassuring stability that comes from knowing who we are, embracing our inherited stories. Stability is comforting, offering a reliable way to be and to act. Yet this security can also be troubling. Embracing a singular perspective may cause confusion to students entering college. They encounter value systems that are not the same as those on the "take to college" list, packed with clothes, computer, or mom's comfort food. The stories that define their identities are called into question. Inherited beliefs may prejudice people from new and possibly better ways of thinking: "I cannot share a bathroom with a stranger." "I can't do math." "I don't associate with black people. How can you expect me to cope?"

Let us explore personal identity more deeply. Not only do I look like my mother, but I speak her language as well. I have my grandmother's curly hair.
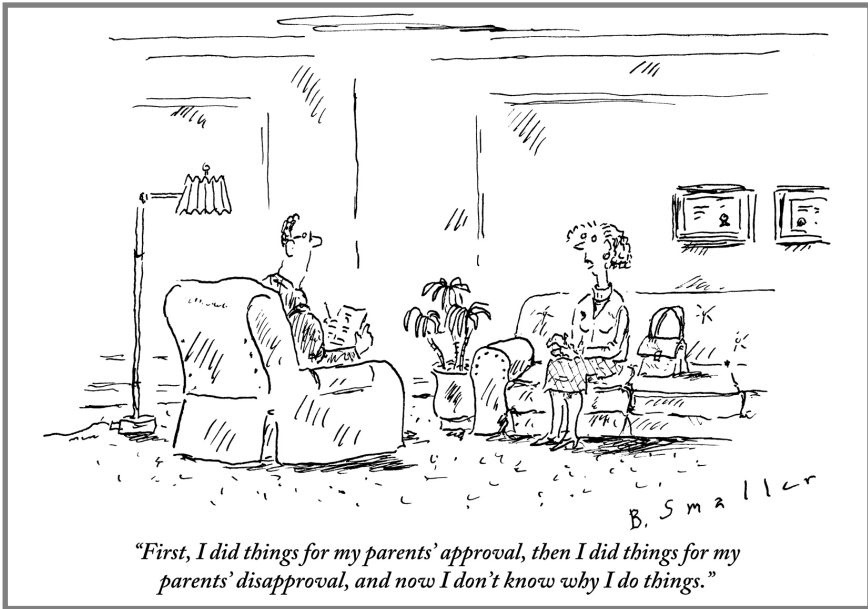
I am tall like Uncle Larry. I am Irish or Italian, Nigerian or Chinese. I come from a long line of teachers or builders or members of the armed services. How many times do I hear these comparisons rehearsed when the family gets together? It is my story, my heritage, who I am.

Initially, persons take on the identity others have constructed for them. They accept standard images of others, sometimes less founded in truth than in stereotypes. The perceptions and prejudices of others can define one's identity inaccurately. If someone tells a young girl she is not attractive (well, after all she *is* Italian, with a dark-skinned and greasy look—and fat from too much pasta) or is not smart enough to do math or sit on the Supreme Court (one needs a masculine brain to think logically); or says to a boy that he lacks some attribute (a white boy cannot jump, no boy can land a girl without "strong" body parts and good abs), the individual so labeled may believe it—or believe it of others. Undoubtedly, the election of a person with dark skin and a different-sounding name to the presidency of the United States has provided a challenge to identity stereotypes that many Americans have. Stereotyping is found in perceptions of religious identities. Some think "Catholic" is all about birth control and rituals that involve eating human flesh. Others believe that all Muslims are terrorists.

Clarity about one's identity is rudimentary for becoming a whole person. Who I am is the starting point for what I choose to be tomorrow. Becoming happens through the process of moral decision making. A person without conscious identity jumps from action to action with no continuity or direction. He spends the weekend drinking, with no concern for the unwritten paper. She becomes stagnant with eyes glued to reality shows, never becoming who she could be. Henrik Ibsen's *Peer Gynt*, mentioned in the introduction, cannot and will not make serious personal choices. Without a sense of identity, reflected and embraced, followed through and actualized in moral choices, Peer can never be a real human person. Identity is each individual's unique story, the scripture from which the rest of life grows.

Tradition: Establishing the Self

Another understanding of heritage is *tradition*. Combining and adjusting what I have been given with my own experience, I construct a *personal tradition*.

"First, I did things for my parents' approval, then I did things for my parents' disapproval, and now I don't know why I do things."

There is a basic question every person must ask: Who is it I want to be? Will I remain the person I am as a college freshman or as a newly minted MBA, or will I choose from a broader range of possibilities? Do I want to become someone else, something more? Every human being has the potential to become a unique being, perhaps a richer one than the original. Each person has the choice to establish an *auto*biography. While this process cannot change the hardwired reality—the story and context into which I was born is fixed—it can and almost certainly will build something new on my initial piece of personal property.

Creating a tradition moves me beyond the past to the future. I can make my own corned beef or ravioli as did my grandmother and mother before me; I can learn to turn out elaborate French pastry; or I can be content simply to boil hot dogs. I can go to college or I can start my own carpentry business. I can sign up for the Marines at eighteen or become a war protester on a college campus. I can choose what kind of religious or moral person I will become. As my horizon expands through experience, what will I keep and what will I discard? What criteria can be used to sort the options? We will address this question in chapter 5.

There is a biblical parable that illustrates this possibility as well as the consequences for not developing one's potential. As he leaves on a long journey, a man gives his servants differing amounts of money, based on their abilities (identity). Some of the servants invest their monies (potential) and enjoy good yields. One simply buries his money, doing nothing but protecting what he already has. Upon his return, the man praises the servants that did something with what they had been given and chastises the man who simply kept what he had been given but never gained anything more (see Matt. 25:14-30). Apparently, the Christian life calls for more than simply preserving what is given.

Karl Rahner, arguably the preeminent Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, talks about the radical human choice for life's direction, a "fundamental option." He defines this as a primary conscious choice to be in relationship with God. Even persons for whom the term *God* has no meaning can choose some path or direction that has meaning for them. I can choose definitively to go to California. That fundamental choice (if I persist) precludes my nestling in New York or sailing for Sicily. While such a choice may be changed, it is irrevocable at a certain moment by its very choosing. Once a person elects a basic relationship or direction in theory, it is made real in large and small choices (categorical actions) that affirm and actualize this basic life choice.[1] I can and do choose goals and values (ends) as well as concrete ways to make them real (means). For the moral project, this new tradition, *my* tradition, is my life.

Community: Where I Become

Finally, heritage always has a context, a community. The first community is the family. Within the family, a person learns language, culture, customs, and values. As a person grows, the community or communities they inhabit change, expand and contract, and sometimes die out. The college freshman experiences the diverse community of the college campus. New languages, customs, and values are presented in both the formal setting of the classroom

and the informal setting of college life. College offers more weighty possibilities than the acquisition of what has traditionally been called the "freshman fifteen." If colleges and universities do their jobs, there is literally a whole new world to sample, to embrace or reject. After graduation, the world of work or graduate school offers even more development. Likewise, when roommates are replaced with spouses, different values and skills come into play.

Both what is given to me—the hardwired starting point of genes, culture, historical place, or story—and what I do with it—the personal tradition that I shape—are nourished and confirmed in company with others. An only child or an orphan is connected to others both for survival and for identity. Even the most individual and private person is the product of a gene pool and culture, a community of other human beings.

Communities tend to preserve their unique heritage. Take families, for example. The little girl learns to dunk a basketball from tall Uncle Larry. The teenage son imitates the soft touch of his mother to make perfect meatballs like hers. Russian daughters wear the costumes of their culture and dance its dances.

The community resists changes that threaten the values and expectations that represent its identity. *La familia* insisted that Michael Corleone remain in the family business and eventually become himself a "godfather." A principled dad is disappointed and sometimes virulently resistant the first time his daughter brings home a boyfriend of a different race or ethnic background—a theme in many movies. Familial and institutional reaction to newness is often an emphatic no. What a culture or a family sees as unchangeable mores dies hard.

Yet the community is the necessary crucible where new ideas and values are tested and sometimes embraced. Dad will come not only to accept the "different" boyfriend, but he will also promote him to others when he becomes his son-in-law and father of his grandchildren. Without the active community acceptance of the rather odd ideas of such innovators as Albert Einstein or Tim Berners-Lee, we might not have the use of the theory of relativity or the World Wide Web. Exposure to that which differs from previous experience can be the starting point for new and better thinking. The novelty that enlivens and energizes the tradition often begins in the community. It provides the oxygen that keeps the fire going and promotes the thaw of inflexibility.

However, the community can also be a source of needed censure when cherished ideas or behavior patterns do not embody real good. Friends encourage you to stop smoking, even though you argue that smoking calms you before a test and keeps you slim. The rules and customs of the community are appropriate cautionary tales. They give persons pause before they launch into behavior that are destructive to them or to the community. Though not the only source for moral wisdom, the community is an important source.

In sum: the community has a necessary function in morality. Jesuit Kevin Wildes puts it well: "Moral communities shape the context of a person's moral world. They have a content-full, particular moral view of the world. Moral communities have some particular understanding of moral authority (Who is to decide? How are decisions reached?)."[2] Communal heritage offers a person both an identity and the possibility for reasoned and evaluated change in the rich company of others. Let us turn now to the parallels in the Christian experience, and particularly in Catholicism.

What Is the Christian/Catholic Heritage?

While they share much with other Christians, Catholics have a distinctive heritage, a strong identity that can direct moral action. They also enjoy an organizational structure that allows for development of what is believed (doctrine)[3] and response to new ideas and issues. Catholic heritage embodies the same basic elements illustrated above. While these elements may not be unique to Catholicism, they are the hallmarks of its heritage.

Scripture is the collection of books believed to be inspired by God, the bedrock of all Christian heritage. It constitutes the identity of Christianity and of Christian believers. What we call the Bible includes many books from Hebrew Scripture as well as twenty-seven books written after the death of Jesus. While there is a difference among various Western religious denominations as to which scriptural books count as "canonical," that is, inspired by God, the Bible remains the go-to book for believers.

As a technical term, *tradition* refers to the collected wisdom passed down in Christianity's two-thousand-year history through "memories, experience, expression and interpretations of the foundational self-revelation of God which is completed with Christ and the New Testament community."[4] In a

sense, it is what Catholicism has made of itself, always rooted in its primordial insights. Tradition provides the vehicle through which newness can be incorporated into the church, making it a living entity moving through history. We speak of tradition as "living" in that it represents the interaction between the foundational elements of Christianity and the ongoing insights of culture.

The *community* is the gathered congregation, the *ekklesia* assembled to worship and to serve. Catholicism is not a solitary religion of individuals, each related to God with no intermediary. Catholicism insists on the mediation of God's message through the gathered community, although this was not a theme emphasized in the pre–Vatican II church. Before the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), it was common for a Catholic to feel connected to others only through the monolithic Latin Mass, which was the same the world over. There was no handshake of peace nor enthusiastic communal participation in the service. A Catholic at the Latin Mass in early 1960 likely would be praying his or her own prayers or rosary, not particularly paying attention to the ritual in progress. Since the council, the element of community in the revised worship has become more visible. Rather than a Mass celebrated by the priest facing the altar and people in the pews engaged in private prayer and singular devotion, the congregation's participation became essential to worship. The priest faces the people. All celebrate together. This change expresses a fundamental shift in Catholic thinking from an attitude that emphasizes a piety and practice of individual salvation to one that embraces the essential relatedness of humankind with regard to salvation and indeed for existence.

Scripture

Let us first consider Scripture. The collection of books that constitutes the Hebrew and Christian Scripture (the canon) is fixed. Individual books were included for various reasons, not always compelling. Some books originated and were preserved in particularly influential communities. Some claim authorship by important people. Some are clearly representative of commonly held beliefs. Some are included for reasons that have been lost in history, much as family stories are randomly selected, preserved, or lost with very little understanding of why. Many other books exist that, in their time, were

candidates for inclusion. Once the canon was decided, no historical or contemporary writings were added. This closure of the biblical canon may imply that God teaches nothing beyond what it contains. This belief is problematic, particularly in moral areas. Novelty as new ideas or questions confronts presumed moral conclusions or even silence of the Bible. Nowhere does Scripture consider such issues as cloning or illegal immigration, for example.

Unlike in other denominations, Catholic moral theology for many centuries was done with little or no reference to the biblical tradition. Concentration was on the individual actions of persons, with little reference to Scripture or to virtue, or sometimes even to real life! As we shall see, this has changed in the last few decades. For Catholics today, the Bible is considered an important foundational tool for moral decision making. The question is *how* to use it. Let us examine two different approaches.

The Literalist Approach. Pure literalists generally understand the books of Scripture as a completed single work, perhaps even literally dictated by God to various human authors. Those who interpret Scripture in this way often do not see a need to examine the literary, cultural, and historical context of the various texts. Interpreters who rely solely on the Bible for moral insight take the word of God seriously and literally in both its narrative content and what appear to be God's unbending rules for living. If God wrote about a garden and two primal parents, it was exactly so. Some literalists even attempt to calculate precisely when this presumed historical reality occurred in ancient time. From the moral perspective, no one should question God's superior wisdom or insight, even in cases where the moral conclusions seem puzzling or counterintuitive.

A strong literalist approach to Scripture works for many people as a basis for a faithful moral life. It is simple and clear. If I understand the Bible to tell me that divorce is immoral, I condemn divorce. If I take literally Paul's counsel to women to cover their heads when they pray (1 Cor. 11:5), I will wear a hat in church—or a Kleenex, as some Catholic women used to do. If Scripture prescribes that those who do not work should not eat (2 Thess. 3:10), I will vote against welfare entitlements. Not all literalists are this unbending, of course. Many are respected scholars who use forms of biblical interpretation in common dialogue with those who take a more historical view.

Nonetheless, there are problems with a too-narrow approach to Scripture. First, the biblical text contains inconsistencies that cannot be resolved easily. It is possible to find puzzling and even contradictory passages, some of which call into question how an all-knowing God could have been its responsible author and editor. If one compares the stories of creation in Genesis 1 and Genesis 2 or considers various narratives about the patriarch Abraham, to offer just two examples, there are evident inconsistencies. Did God forget what God wrote the first time about the origins of the world? Did God change God's mind as to how creation took place? Was Adam created at the same time as Eve—an implication of equality, as the first creation story suggests; or did the creation of the first woman from a rib wait until Adam appeared to be lonely—an implication of inequality, with woman a subset of man? Genesis 1 locates the creation of human beings at the end—the epitome of God's work; Genesis 2 narrates God's creation of wild animals and birds *after* that of Adam. One has to wonder what God was thinking. God could have used a good editor! People who see these inconsistencies can easily dismiss Scripture as having little or no relevance to their moral lives.

God's moral demands in ancient times often appear as somewhat arbitrary or even outright immoral by modern moral standards. God asks Abraham to kill his only son (likely provoking severe psychological damage to both!), when it was God who engineered this son's birth in the first place. Did God for the moment set aside the promise to Abraham for many descendants? Isaac was Abraham's only legitimate child, born when his wife's biological clock was almost done ticking. While it is common belief that God can do anything and therefore could provide another heir for Abraham, it seems counterintuitive that God should make things so complicated. It also appears out of character that a God of love should so torment his favored servant, Abraham. Human wisdom would expect the super-creative and clever God to have devised another, less complicated test for his chosen servant. The story (Gen. 22) resolves with God's praise of Abraham's trust and the promise of descendants "as countless as the stars of the skies and the sands of the seashore" (Gen. 22:17). Nevertheless, such an arbitrary and cruel God seems difficult to accept. And easy to reject by someone who wants a way out of moral responsibility.

With regard to prescribed sexual morality, even stickier problems arise. God seems to encourage bigamy, as in the case of Abraham, and/or adultery.

God's creative juices appear to fail as the divinity uses essentially the same story promoting (yes, promoting) extramarital sex three times (Gen. 12:10-20; 20:1-18; 26:1-12). Come on, God. You can do better than that!

In Christian Scripture, one finds different statements about divorce offered in the Synoptic Gospels. (*Synoptic* refers to the first three Gospels, which have many parallels in content and structure.) Matthew (19:3-9) insists that remarriage after divorce is adultery *except in the case of "lewd conduct* [Greek: *porneia*]"; Mark (10: 2-11) allows no exception, nor does Luke (16:18). The Gospel of John omits these passages altogether. These examples, while certainly not exhaustive, lead one to confusion as to how or whether Scripture is a helpful moral guide.

It might be useful to note here that Catholics generally do not use the Bible as the sole source for moral prescription. Catholic moral theology has traditionally taken a natural law approach, which holds that all people of good will can know and do the good. Therefore it is not essential that moral standards be revealed in a formal way by God in Scripture. We shall return to this idea in chapter 3.

The Historical-Critical Approach. Modern Scripture scholars take a different point of view from that of the extreme literalists described above. They understand Scripture from a historical-critical perspective. That is to say, they see the text as contextual rather than ahistorical. They study it much the way a literary scholar would study a piece of literature. Biblical scholars ask questions of the text. They explore when the book was written and its historical context. They try to find the human author's purpose and audience. What literary forms were used to convey the message? How is this particular slice of Scripture congruent with other books of the Bible? In what way can this scriptural passage give insight into correct moral action? These questions help the scholar—and the believer—to see Scripture in a much fuller way. They help understand not only a written text but also its context and its richer meaning.

While not denying necessarily that the books of the Bible are the definitive word of God, such scholars believe that God's key message is to be found beyond the puzzling and often contradictory exigencies of particular times and places, the detritus collected by the revelationary snowball moving through time. The divine message is encrusted with beliefs and practices common in

historic ancient cultures but not relevant for audiences in other historical set-
tings. Some accepted behaviors would today be seen as morally reprehensible.
Many stories may not reflect actual historical events. The Abraham and Isaac
story, for example, may be simply an engaging story which shows that the God
of the Israelites no longer required child sacrifice, as did some contemporary
religions. Still, to question the historicity of portions of the Bible is not the
same as dismissing its message.

Ancient biblical peoples accepted bigamy and, in some circumstances,
adultery as moral. Many communities, among them the chosen people chron-
icled in the Hebrew Scripture, embraced the idea that waging war was God's
idea. God's chosen people accepted rape and pillage of the enemy and the
enemy's territory. With God on their side, they could do terrible things with
impunity. This idea has been reprised in modern form in the lyrics of a Bob
Dylan song: "With God on [their] side."

Approval of brutal behavior by ancient societies reflected their historically
limited understanding of what was good. Survival, not philosophical reflec-
tion, constituted their everyday life. What is affirmed as moral today was not
always within the horizons of ancient peoples. Just as an emancipated African
American woman of the early twentieth century might not see herself as com-
pletely free, much less as a movie celebrity or as president, Abraham could not
envision a world without many wives or the constant waging of war. In the
course of history, narrow assumptions and vision gave way to endorsement
of monogamy and a more nuanced view of combat. When the stale debris
of ancient civilizations is washed away, the key message of God's revelation
remains.

Jesus seems to set aside the "old" law, as he blatantly disregards contem-
porary mores. Yet in a text written for a Jewish-Christian community of the
first century, Jesus proclaims that he will not change the law but fulfill it
(Matt. 5:17-19). A historical-critical interpretation would interpret this pas-
sage as reassurance to the Jewish-Christian audience that his goal was not
to throw out their history and beliefs (heritage). Yet he goes on to nuance
some of the teachings of the Jewish tradition: it is a foundation on which to
build, not a barricade to development. In particular, he calls his listeners to
move beyond the revenge morality of historic Judaism—"an eye for an eye"
(Exod. 21:24)—to something as radical as love for enemies—"But I say to

you: offer no resistance to one who is evil. When someone strikes you on your right cheek, turn the other one to him as well" (Matt. 5:39). Jesus' iconoclastic actions toward the woman caught in adultery, who was being stoned by a crowd in accordance with the law (John 8), and his acceptance of his hungry disciples' picking grain to eat on the Sabbath (Matt. 12:1-8) offer just two examples. His "fulfillment of the law" goes well beyond the moral tenets of his time and culture. This "new teaching" is not bound by a particular historical understanding but wrapped in the eternal demands of love.

A fundamentalist or extreme literalist might be puzzled by such challenges to accepted rules. Was not the "old" law God's revealed practice? How could a change in practice be God's will? It is exactly this sort of dilemma that troubled the pious people of Jesus' time who saw his radical departure from old ways as wrong, even blasphemous. The observant leaders of the Jews, the Pharisees, certainly were troubled by Jesus' actions. His "new teaching" contradicted the Jewish standards of his day.

Today has its share of uncomfortable questions, as contemporary society wrestles with gay marriage, stem cell research, the use of torture. None are adjudicated in Scripture. Nevertheless, if one is to fold the use of Scripture into the quest for moral solutions, one must take an approach to the ancient and revered texts that interprets them in a historical-critical context. Then, as new issues arise or new insights into old issues come into focus, there is a way rooted in a Christian identity to address them. The key question is to sift what are merely cultural or historically contextual differences—perhaps an appropriate relativism—from an advancing and perhaps more enlightened and true understanding of moral rightness.

To sum up, we have considered two polar approaches to Scripture: one respects God's authorship and authority in a strict literal interpretation of Scripture, while the other sees God's message contextualized in a certain historical setting. There has been no attempt to nuance properly the variety that exists in both these approaches. Texts are the products of various authors with particular agendas and audiences. Just as one's heritage, while clearly something real and unchanging in itself, can be interpreted and appropriated in a number of ways, the same can be said of Scripture. This book will utilize the second approach, which affirms that Scripture is the inspired word of God but sees it as conveying primarily the message of God's relationship to humanity

rather than a set of precipitated moral demands. It is this interpretation of the Bible that gives an adequate narrative of identity to Christians and a way to provide guidance for moral action in novel contexts. It is an approach that reflects the best of Catholic Scripture scholarship.

Scripture as Moral Teacher. Catholic moralist Richard Gula addresses the question of how to appropriate Scripture in morality. His starting point for Christian morality is the divine covenant with human beings, initiated with the ancient Hebrews and fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ. Gula speaks of what he calls "revealed reality."[5] Christian morality, he says, begins in the person's radical response to God's offer of an unconditional relationship in love, outlined in Scripture. It is more than rules. Rather, it represents a fundamental offer to every human being to seek God as the final end of human existence. It calls for a response: "If it is displeasing to you to serve the Lord, choose today whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15). Those who respond to this offer commit themselves to lives of choices firmly grounded in that relationship. Those choices are not completely predetermined. Rather, they flow from a synergy between personal God-human love in the real circumstances and discrete decisions of the individual. They are the activation of the potential that comes from the identity we name "Catholic." Nevertheless, as will become clear later, this position does not render Catholic morality relativistic, arbitrary, or individualistic. The content of Catholic morality is based in values found in reality and in a cultivation of subjective virtue. It is nourished and tested by spiritual and intellectual development within a community of believers. Its goal is the completion of persons, in the sense of the United States Army motto: "Be all that you can be."

Both the Hebrew and Christian biblical corpus affirm that God's presence continues with us in what Gula calls "community-creating activity."[6] This is a reality rooted in personal relationships of faith. Human beings are called to answer God's invitation with "*reverence, conversion,* and *responsibility.*"[7] The free response of each person is acted out daily in real time in real choices that make the qualities more and more a part of who that person is becoming. These choices are tempered and ratified in the community of faith. This is revealed reality made present in the real world. It is each person's participation in the incarnation.

Gula speaks also of "revealed morality." This concept implies more than a set of laws or knee-jerk responses to the facile question, "What would Jesus do?" It is echoed in the social justice voices of the eighth-century-B.C.E. Hebrew prophets and in the Sermon on the Mount. Gula sees the radical sayings of the Sermon on the Mount as challenging *ideals* to be worked out in life's choices rather than specific *commands.*

Perhaps Jesus' strongest moral imperative is found in his teaching to love one's neighbor as oneself. What this means is unambiguous; it is not so clear how this "great commandment" plays out in the life of each person. One must discern whether one's actions are congruent to the admonition to love God and to love neighbor as one loves oneself. Perhaps this is why Jesus' answer to the impertinent lawyer's question, "Who is my neighbor?" (Luke 25:29) was a story rather than a rule.

Tradition

The second pillar of Catholic heritage is *tradition.* Catholics believe that God's Spirit continues to inspire and guide the church in its official pronouncements and practices. There is a strong connective thread joining the life of the earthly Jesus with the early Christian house church, the cathedral in the fifteenth century, and the church in Anywhere, 2011. Tradition, as O'Collins and Farrugia note, "secures continuity from its [the church's] origins into the future."[8] It constitutes what the church has made of itself from its original building blocks.

Catholicism sees the revelation of God play out in the real events of history. God first enters human consciousness through the covenant with the ancient people of Israel. They felt God's presence with them (God is with us: *Emmanuel*) as they moved toward the promised land through desert hardship. They had a column of cloud by day and at night a column of fire (Exod. 13:21) to remind them that God's presence and providence is constant. As their civilization evolved, so did the divine-human relationship. It culminates for Christians in the revelation of God in the Christ.

Christians see the birth of Jesus as a definitive revelation of God to humankind. Even the description of how this occurs indicates a change in the human condition. This unique entrance of God into the world is a spectacular special event, a *kairos* that signals a new level of relationship with its own

new and unique revelation. The Gospels present a story of special conception (Luke 1:26-33), fulfillment of prophecy (Matt. 1:18-23), and radical immanence (John 1:14).

Catholic Christians do not see this event as the end of the story. God's Spirit continues God's presence within persons and the constructed church organization (Matt. 28:18-20; John 16:12-14). Contemporary church structure has little resemblance to early Christianity, yet Catholics believe that God's presence in an organizational structure guarantees that in its official teaching the church will not err. This is not a statement about the pope forecasting the weather or predicting what number will win the lottery. Rather, it is a belief that whatever is taught definitively presents a secure path to God. That is not the same as saying it is the *only* path. I can teach a child how to tie her shoes using the bunny ears method. The shoes are tied effectively. I can teach a child another, more complicated way, also effective. The guarantee of God's presence in the tradition is that what is taught is a reliable way,[9] if not the only way.[10]

The institutional church, trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit (as promised in the Gospel of John), continues throughout the centuries to develop teaching that responds to novel historical situations and questions. Early in the church, people asked whether one had to become Jewish to become a Christian, meaning that male converts must submit to circumcision. While Christianity rightly continues to incorporate many of the values and insights from the Hebrew Scriptures, the question of sorting the essential connections from the accidental was present early on. The church leaders found consensus about an issue not addressed by Jesus.[11] They concluded that circumcision is not an essential sign of Christianity.

Over the centuries, new questions arose and were resolved. Is Jesus really both God and human? Should marriage be a sacrament? Should priests marry? What is the place of Jesus' mother, Mary, in the work of salvation? Some questions result in definitive and irrevocable teaching that builds on or clarifies the revelation suggested or preserved in the biblical texts. Early church councils, after many years of debate, and occasionally wars, concluded definitively that Jesus Christ possesses two natures in one person (Council of Chalcedon 451). He is not merely a God in a human disguise nor a human with supernatural powers. The documents of Vatican II (1963–1965) hail the

importance of the human person (*Gaudium et spes*), affirm religious freedom (*Dignitatis humanae*), and counsel openness to God's revelation to other religious traditions (*Unitatis redintegratio*).

Other questions remain open, to be revised or even reversed as they seek both congruence with the past and adequate responses to contemporary issues. The church's stance on usury (charging interest on borrowed money), once considered immoral, is now accepted by church teaching as an appropriate part of modern commerce. Moral teachings generally are less likely to fall into the definitive category, as concrete moral situations are always contextual and therefore open to various interpretations. This is not to say that all moral conclusions are equally valid. Context colors the moral landscape; it does not define it. Exceptions can be found, but they cannot be justified on the basis of whim or feeling. Determining moral rightness is complex.

The church's moral wisdom is expressed generally in principles or ideals rather than in narrowly interpreted prescriptions for behavior, much like the teachings of Jesus. This mode also resembles Gula's "revealed morality." Rarely does church moral teaching draw precise conclusions about how one should behave. Rather, it reaffirms core principles and values applicable to concrete behavioral situations. A good illustration of this is a recent revision of the *Ethical and Religious Directives for Catholic Hospitals*, largely in response to the Terri Schiavo case (a young brain-damaged woman kept alive for many years on artificial nutrition and hydration). Directive 58 details the *principle* of human dignity and the moral responsibility to nourish people, even people in a persistent vegetative state (like Schiavo). It reaffirms that one can never *intend* the death of another through removal of such life support. Yet the document does not give a single answer to cover all concrete situations, allowing that circumstances may preclude initiating or continuing such intervention. Moral teaching can articulate principles; it is exquisitely hesitant to draw conclusions for a particular instance.

Community

The third and final pillar that constitutes the Catholic heritage is the *community*. Just as the ancient Hebrews are called to relationship with God not simply as individuals but as a people, so are Christians. The biblical text bears

this out. Time and time again, the stories of the Gospels and Epistles are set in community, often in the context of meals. From the various accounts of the origin of the eucharistic banquet[12] to the many celebrations and seemingly miraculous feedings, those who follow Christ are nourished in body and in soul in the presence of others. They are called to be people who care for others not only individually but in community.

Catholic Christians are called to more than private piety and personal dissection of their own individual actions. Past Catholic practice, certainly prevalent in the middle of the last century, emphasized both individual piety and the individual's personal moral actions. The former encouraged or at least tolerated saying the rosary or private devotions during Mass. The latter emphasized sexual sins and other actions of the solitary person. Not until changes brought on by Vatican II in the 1960s did the church alter its focus to underscore the importance of communal and participatory prayer forms, especially the Mass, and to emphasize more emphatically the social nature of moral actions. Before Vatican II, Catholics rarely if ever heard preaching on homelessness, concern for the poor and changing social structures that keep them poor, and other elements of so-called social sin. Such questions as "Did I say my morning prayers? Did I eat meat on a Friday in Lent? How many times did I get angry with my boss? Did I practice birth control?" have given way to "Where have I grown in love for my neighbor? What should I do to alleviate the crisis of drought in Africa or AIDS in San Francisco? How can I live my life in service to those I meet? How can I change structures that keep people in oppressive situations?" Involvement in the particular communities that address such questions reinforces not only the values embedded in the queries but also offers tools to implement the changes they imply. Chapter 4 will explore such ideas more deeply.

The community serves a number of functions. It is the place where the heritage is preserved, maintaining the story or identity, and passed on. Irish families celebrate their roots on St. Patrick's Day and teach their children favorite songs or dances they learned as children, and Italian mothers use their kitchens to show their young ones how to make the unique family sauce. The Christian community maintains and hands to the next generation what it has experienced and cherished. The family learns over time to embrace its gay son or racially different daughter-in-law; the community of the church

responds to the newness of God's ongoing revelation in its evolving tradition. The tradition takes what is and creates what can be. A new identity emerges.

The community, not only in its leadership but also embodied in its members, keeps safe core beliefs. It recognizes and responds to the novelty of historical development. In the richness of worship and community, the *ekklesia* experiences what is believed, celebrated, reinforced, and taught to the next generation. In the extension of the liturgical action beyond the elements of bread and wine, believers—those who incarnate the *imago Dei* ("image of God") as each becomes *alter Christus* ("another Christ")—are charged to infect their various environments with this reality. Each bears the responsibility to make Christ and Christ's values present wherever they are. Imitating Christ, notes Catholic sister and moral theologian Anne Patrick, "involves much more than obedience to commandments and conformity to social expectations." It involves a creative process that nurtures imagination and creativity.[13]

The Catholic culture provides the place—or better, the occasion—where members come together to remember and to celebrate what they believe. A family Thanksgiving is not only an opportunity to eat too much turkey and stuffing, but it is also the special time—a *kairos*—when family stories are shared and customs are repeated. As the family lingers at the table, they reminisce about crazy Grandpa Joe, who died on New Year's Day after eating a bad mushroom he had picked; or Aunt Mary, who dyed her hair but would never admit it; or Cousin Keisha, who saved every penny she could working at small jobs until she could afford to go to college. Eating sweet potato pie from Grandma's recipe and turkey placed on the special platter that great grandfather brought from the "old country" reinforces the identity, the heritage of the family. History is passed on. At our house, we indulge in the traditional slurping of the melting gelatin mold, a recurring and clandestine practice that the adult children still revisit whenever the parents go into the kitchen to put things away, and after-dinner card games.

Treasured and repeated narratives, artifacts, and actions reinforce who we are, what is uniquely important to a particular group, and what the community and its members are becoming. In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof*, there is a poignant scene in which the Jewish mother reverently lights the Sabbath candles. A kaleidoscope of images of Jewish women appears sequentially on the screen, evoking Jewish families of distant and diverse time and place. The

Jewish mother of the present evokes the past, even as she differs from it. Tradition, which presents with different faces and culture, remembers, celebrates, and becomes something new.

This is not merely a cognitive experience. It commemorates past events with respect and emotion and brings them into the present. As anyone who has attended a ritual—religious or secular—knows, there is a movement of the heart as well as the head. American sports fans do not view the World Series without emotion; Europeans go crazy during the soccer finals. When celebrating with family, we laugh with Aunt Mary, mourn for Grandpa Joe, feel grateful for the gifts given to us, hug the person next to us with renewed appreciation of their goodness and of ours. And something new happens.

Finally, the community is a place that teaches and reinforces morality. Whether it be by custom or prescription, the community exercises authority over the behavior of its members. If a woman belongs to a strict Muslim community, she abides by rules about head covering. If a man is a Jew, he is circumcised. If one belongs to a Christian church, he or she is baptized. Some groups prescribe lifelong marital fidelity or special dietary practices. Some mandate tithing or specific charitable actions. Those who do not follow the rules are often marginalized and sometimes even excluded. Again, from *Fiddler on the Roof*: the youngest daughter is shunned by her father, albeit painfully for both. She is expelled from the community when she marries outside the Jewish faith. While one may rightly argue the appropriateness of the imposition of seemingly harsh moral rules, such demands are characteristic of all human communities or aggregates. It is precisely this enforcement of morality that has made the news as Catholic politicians who uphold the law that permits abortion in the United States are banned from Communion by some bishops. In the civil arena, it is collective normative standards that have shaped civil laws that allow abortion or forbid interracial marriage.

Some Final Thoughts

The Catholic *heritage* offers a rich and resilient basis for Christian living. It is the foundation for a moral life. Nevertheless, it is not solely a collection of tenets and tasks renewed through the centuries. It is a living *tradition* rooted in Scripture that offers to each generation and each person the opportunity to

be in relationship with the God of love. It is a living tradition with flexibility to respond to new insights and new challenges, both doctrinal and moral, at any point in history. It is located not exclusively in private individual relationship with God but in the *community* of believers who are called to experience the Christ and respond to his love in ever-richer ways. The Christian themes of incarnation, death, and resurrection are played out in the response of each Christian life: I become human in Christ, I live a life of service which includes dying to the things that stand in the way of the ultimate goal of life, I am reborn in the image of God in Christ. The moral life is not a series of isolated acts but rather a trajectory of choices rooted in a specific system of belief and aimed at a particular goal. It is an awareness of what brings about the common good and furthers the reign of God. It is a life of virtue and response to value. Ultimately, each person is asked whether he or she wants to embrace the relationship with God in Christ as the foundation of the moral life, the base of the hidden iceberg. Ultimately, this is the starting point from which moral action flows.

In this first chapter, we have looked at heritage, the foundation for a moral life. We have considered identity. We have seen how identity can change, as we form our own traditions. We have suggested that past, present, and future are nourished in the community: family, friends, religious groups. We have applied these three elements to a Christian context. Heritage in all its aspects is the first building block for the moral life. We shall return to this building block as the first element in formation of conscience (chapter 6).

We have, however, left many questions unanswered. Without specific rules, can I do anything I wish? Are the values of all communities equally valid; and if they are not, how do we resolve conflicts? How does the small community of my family or my friends relate to the religious community or even to the diverse world community? If I profess to be a Catholic Christian, are my rules the same as everyone or are they unique?

In the succeeding chapters, we will reprise many of the themes introduced in this chapter. The next chapter will present a short model or paradigm from the Gospel of John of what a committed Christian life might look like. Later we will demonstrate how the human person builds a moral foundation (chapters 4–6). Finally, we will offer a principle based in a Catholic Christian morality that can be applied to all moral issues and a method for making decisions (chapters 7–8).

Questions for Discussion

1. What have I learned from my family of origin? What values do my family customs illustrate?
2. At this point in my life, which, if any, of my family's values do I want to nourish? Which to reject? On what basis?
3. Explain the three aspects of heritage, of Catholic heritage. Are these important for me? Why or why not?
4. In what ways does my personal decision making reflect the values from my family and/or religious tradition?

Suggestions for Further Reading

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