

• NOTES ON MORAL THEOLOGY •

LIVING THE TRUTH:
FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGICAL ETHICS

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At the 2009 convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America, the author advocated for a more rhetorically robust and closer-to-the-truth style in theological ethics. In this note, he examines those works that embody that style by capturing the urgency and immediacy of moral truth as lived in the lives of contemporary Christians. In particular, he finds that the closer we come to the truth, the more we inevitably recognize that conflict, tension, ambiguity, and even bewilderment are necessary, integral components of the true human moral narrative.

NOVEMBER 10, 2012, MARKS THE 100TH ANNIVERSARY of the birth of Bernhard Häring, who revived moral theology by writing in a way that responded to people as they actually lived their lives.¹ The reality of people's lives was something Häring aimed to address, in part because he was radically transformed by World War II. There he found truth not primarily in what persons said but in how they acted and lived. The war experiences irretrievably disposed him to the agenda of developing a moral theology that aimed for the bravery, solidarity, and truthfulness of those committed Christians he met during the war.² Not surprisingly, he found truth more in persons than in propositional utterances.

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¹ James F. Keenan, "Bernhard Häring's Influence on American Catholic Moral Theology," *Journal of Catholic Moral Theology* 1.1 (2012); see also Keenan, *A History of Catholic Moral Theology in the Twentieth Century: From Confessing Sins to Liberating Consciences* (New York: Continuum, 2010) 83–110.

² Bernhard Häring, *My Witness for the Church*, intro. and trans. Leonard Swidler (New York: Paulist, 1992).

This note in honor of Häring's legacy is rightly entitled "Living the Truth." But this phrase echoes the title of Klaus Demmer's book newly translated as *Living the Truth: A Theory of Action*.³ I believe that not since Häring's *The Law of Christ* have we received from a senior moral theologian such an innovative and complete work mapping a contemporary moral theology. This brief, three-chapter meditation took the award-winning translator Brian McNeil nearly three years to complete. The upshot is that he preserved the lucidity and the poetry of the original text.

DEMMEER'S LIVING THE TRUTH

In his introduction, Demmer asserts that "ethical questions are existential questions," and that moral norms "are the result of life histories on which people have reflected," and that "the root of these histories is experience."⁴ While reminding us that moral theology examines the justifiability of norms of ethical conduct, Demmer argues that the goal of moral theology is the "building up of an ethical personality. The competence in matters of ethical insight must correspond to an ability to engage in conflicts that allow a person to survive the drama of his own life history."⁵

Demmer presumes conflict in life, becomes suspicious when moral tensions diminish, and recognizes that conflicts are resolved through moral lives and relationships and have their own embodied, complicated histories. In this world of conflict, Demmer finds the God of providence who through the event of the death and resurrection of Jesus has concretely freed us from sin and death. The theologian's reflection on this event is central: "it is impossible to think more radically than this of the conflictual history of humanity."⁶

Demmer's ethics of a life lived in truth is hardly triumphalistic: The right realization of "human existence begins with the admission of one's own weakness. The ethical claim meets the Christian where she is thrown back on her own resources and suffers under the limitations of what she can do."⁷ Still, since the Christian makes "her life history a project aiming at the vision of God," "her life story has theophanic traits."⁸

³ Klaus Demmer, *Living the Truth: A Theory of Action*, trans. Brian McNeil (Washington: Georgetown University, 2010). I must disclose my involvement with this text: I secured the grant to cover its translation, supervised the translation, edited the galleys, wrote the foreword, and published it in my series, *Moral Traditions*, Georgetown University Press. Nonetheless, the work is entirely Demmer's, written 20 years ago: *Die Wahrheit Leben: Theorie des Handelns* (Freiburg: Herder, 1991).

⁴ Demmer, *Living the Truth* 1.

⁵ *Ibid.* 3.

⁶ *Ibid.* 22.

⁷ *Ibid.* 22–23.

⁸ *Ibid.* 28–29.

From the awkward limits of one's own self to the grace-filled response to follow the Lord, Demmer sees progress in being a disciple of Christ: "The art of pruning back her self-importance and arriving at a realistic self-assessment is bestowed only on the person whose grasp of the greatness of her goals progressively increases."⁹ The basic lesson to understand is the perpetual tension between being and knowing, a historically ongoing dialectic: only by living the Christian life can we understand the Christian message. Demmer proposes here the virtue of modesty as a companion for navigating this tension between who we discover ourselves to be and yet who we believe we are called by Christ to become. "The truthful person is refreshingly different. His intellectual modesty gives him the courage needed for a morality of small steps."¹⁰

For Demmer, then, the fundamental role of faith in moral theology is ever developing in terms of the history of a life of human experience. "While revelation does not bring about any immediate growth in knowledge on the normative level, it does establish a new context for the foundations of normative ethics."¹¹

Yet because conflict so thematically shapes the horizons of our future, Demmer advocates for the virtue of *epikeia*, which helps us decipher the moral claims upon us and interpret their summons. This in turn requires us to stand with the virtue of courage before the shaping of our futures. *Epikeia*, then, does not lead us away from the law of love but toward its right expression and ought never to be identified with dispensation of the law, which is often no more than a "flight from truth."¹²

For Demmer, what we are searching to understand and to live is the truth, and for him truth is not a construct. On the contrary, it "lies outside our control."¹³

Like *epikeia*, the virtue of tolerance becomes pivotal for the church leader who must grapple with pluralism. Demmer's understanding of tolerance is hardly a blank check for diversity: "Tolerance becomes untruthful as soon as it surreptitiously abandons the search for consensus; freedom's right to search for the truth also includes an obligation to accept the truth." But Demmer recognizes that consensus arises by shared reflection and persuasion, and by force. So he warns: "Nevertheless, there is one thing we should not forget: a dissent that is endured in honest tolerance is certainly a better basis, and is easier to live, than a forced consensus that

⁹ Ibid. 33.

¹⁰ Ibid. 106.

¹¹ Ibid. 29.

¹² Ibid. 115.

¹³ Ibid. 41.

fails to respect the fact that one must accept the burden entailed by the processes whereby knowledge is attained.”¹⁴

Demmer is clear about leadership and the shape of a theology built on the community of saints and sinners:

The Church is a community of saints and sinners, of those who mastered their life stories and those who have failed to do so, and one cannot apply to such a community the categories of order that are more suited to an absolutist state and to the interpersonal bonds, the law, and the morality that such a state assumes. Within the Church, none of this is needed.¹⁵

But where is moral theology as a specific enterprise, as a science? For Demmer, “the specific object of ethical reason is the good. However, the convergence of the true and the good—which is typical of ethical truth—presupposes the Scholastic doctrine of transcendentals.”¹⁶ Thus, the discipline of moral theology and its quest for the good occurs within the school of truthfulness. Within that school we find the conscience as “the person in his or her self-enactment with its reference toward transcendence.”¹⁷

The moral theologian must therefore be vigilant to the lives human beings live. “The existential problems under which people suffer silently tend to be inconspicuous. They remain in silence and play scarcely any role in the public academic arena.” But to these complicated lives, the moral theologian must pay particular attention.¹⁸ The ambit of the theologian’s reflection is as thick as the life of the person: “Every one of life’s dramas is played out primarily in these depths, and it is only against this background that all concrete directives for action take on meaning.”¹⁹

As for Charles Curran so for Demmer, the point of departure for the moral theologian is the life lived in the Church. He calls the moral theologian “an ecclesial thinker about existence.”²⁰ Here he has some challenging words for the moral theologian as well as for those who bear the magisterium. Demmer’s historicism might make members of the magisterium uneasy with an unfolding sense of truth in the history of lives lived. He writes:

It is understandable that the magisterium is afraid to move out onto insecure terrain. No matter how unfinished the tradition may be in individual aspects, the

¹⁴ Ibid. 81.

¹⁵ Ibid. 115. Here we can think of Bishop Kevin Dowling’s prophetic words in Cape Town, South Africa, on June 1, 2010, “The Current State of the Church,” *Furrow* 61 (2010) 591–97.

¹⁶ Demmer, *Living the Truth* 42.

¹⁷ Ibid. 119.

¹⁸ Ibid. 63.

¹⁹ Ibid. 79.

²⁰ Ibid. 78.

magisterium fears losing it or exposing it to misunderstandings. Moral theology must show that these fears are groundless. It must demonstrate that differentiation is not the same thing as backsliding. The texts of the magisterium are only as good as the prevalent bogeyman and contemporary theology allow. Sometimes these texts expend energy in places that do not deserve this; the magisterium continues to speak about problems that have long since been resolved, and rear-guard actions are fought that can only distort the necessary awareness of the problem involved.²¹

Demmer's patience with history helps us see that the ethical personality is a full life lived, a lifelong process, and therefore "truthfulness requires goals to which it is worth committing one's life."²² In moving toward those goals, the person is shaped by reality as it truly is: "The truthful person continually lets the world of her thoughts be torn open by reality."²³

Toward the end of his work, Demmer finds in the renaissance of virtue ethics some resonance. Wisely he writes, "Normative ethics demands an antecedent virtue ethics if directives for action are not to congeal into hard and fast rules in their endeavor to be objective."²⁴ Again turning to modesty, he concludes:

It takes time to gain a foothold in truthfulness. Each person grows cautiously into the truth, and often crises prompt a growth spurt. . . . The person who is moved and touched by the virtue of truthfulness attempts to create situations in which a maximum revelation of the truth is possible. . . . The virtue of truthfulness reveals itself as a virtue that accompanies others on the path.²⁵

Though Demmer's work does not have a more explicitly socially conscious fundamental moral theology, his foundational claims about identity, human experience, the critical moments of life, truth lived, conscience, the transcendent, and history are themselves less derived from an individualistic anthropology and are more appropriate for a robust social one. In fact, in a new Festschrift, several authors write about the deeply interrelational dimensions of Demmer's work.²⁶

²¹ Ibid. 110.

²² Ibid. 101.

²³ Ibid. 102.

²⁴ Ibid. 104.

²⁵ Ibid. 143–44.

²⁶ Aristide Fumagalli and Vincenzo Viva, eds., *Pensare l'agire morale: Omaggio italiano a un maestro internazionale Klaus Demmer* (San Paolo: Cinisello Balsamo 2011). See especially: Renzo Caseri, "L'Amore del prossimo: I legami nell'era dei social network," 144–59; Giampaolo Dianin, "Le sfide dell'opzione vitale: Riflessioni sul fidanzamento" 194–213; Vincenzo Viva, "Profilo esistenziale di K. Demmer: Per una biografia teologica" 11–29; Alberto Bonandi, "La teologia morale di K. Demmer: Per una prima collocazione" 30–54; and Aristide Fumagalli, "La coscienza morale secondo K. Demmer: Una scelta determinante" 83–105.

OTHER CONTRIBUTIONS TO LIVING THE TRUTH

Demmer's thesis of entering fully into the lived historical experience of people so as to encounter truth in both its otherness and its complex challenge makes for a fundamental, remarkable, and lasting contribution. If he gives us a penetrating synthesis into the challenging charge of doing moral theology, then Marilyn Martone gives us a breath-taking, transparent personal account of living the moral truth. In *Over the Waterfall* Martone writes with unapologetic abandon as the mother of a 21-year-old University of Chicago senior, hit by a car in February 1998. Her daughter Michelle remained unconscious for eight months, but came out of her coma as a severely brain-injured person. For the most part, the book covers a two-year exhausting and deeply disturbing odyssey through hospitals and rehabilitation services. The last chapter, describing Michelle's now eleven years of being cared for at home, reflects on her family's helping her "reestablish her autobiographical identity," which today is "slowly forming."²⁷ Along the way we encounter Martone's 13 years of advocacy for her disabled daughter. Martone has been a compelling voice on the issue of rehabilitation and disability,²⁸ but in this book, her own "confessions," she provides the thick historical narrative that allows us to enter the real world of ethics and disability.

Sharing their lives of faith, Patricia Lamoreux and Paul Waddell have written a course book for theological ethics that leads from the call of discipleship to the kingdom with reflections on love, sin, and virtue, all in the context of a globalized church. Though they are generous in referring to their many contributing colleagues and predecessors, they personalize their text into a fine introduction to moral theology, showing us through narrative what living the truth is all about.²⁹

Achieving the balance between content and style is not an easy task in meeting the sometimes-conflicting expectations of church and academy. One modest achievement is from the University of Comillas's Julio Martinez, who plumbs the depths of (especially Ignatian) spirituality to fashion a way of living that confront matters in social morality. By turning to notions of

²⁷ Marilyn Martone, *Over the Waterfall* (Lexington, Ky.: CreateSpace, 2011) 193.

²⁸ Martone, "What Persons with Disabilities Can Teach Us about Health Care," *Health Care Ethics USA* 19.3 (2011) 6–12. See her blog, as an ongoing advocate for people with disabilities, <http://marilynmartone.com/>. (This and all other URLs cited herein were accessed November 12, 2011.) See also Mary Jo Iozzio, "The Authority of Experience and Study: Persons with Disabilities Adequately and Integrally Considered," *Louvain Studies* 35 (2011) 162–80.

²⁹ Patricia Lamoreux and Paul J. Waddell, *The Christian Moral Life: Faithful Discipleship for a Global Society* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010). See also William Mattison, *Introducing Moral Theology: True Happiness and the Virtues* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2008).

moral truth, the virtues, love, and solidarity, he constructs a way of talking about the intimate connections between ethics and lived faith.³⁰

The journey to living the truth is not a direct one. In a fascinating essay, “The Grace of Indirection and the Moral Imagination,” the late Russell Connors reflects on an earlier contribution by William Spohn in 2005.³¹ Connors fills out what Spohn started, helping us see that we catch glimpses of the presence of God and grace in our lives only obliquely, indirectly. If we want to become vigilant of that presence, then we need a moral imagination that is formed by the arts. By being vigilant, we can get into the habit of being indirectly guided to the truth.³²

In a beautiful essay that compellingly complements Connors’s essay, Lee Yearley offers us the ethics of bewilderment that again reminds us of the complex contours of life’s journey. Yearley, a comparative theologian, looks at Du Fu and Dante, who each treat bewilderment in the texts of their own poetry. Yearley notes that bewilderment “can . . . be associated with childhood, madness, stupidity and failure,” but it can also refer to certain religious forms that “will never lead you back to common sense.” These forms offer a walk into “a further wild place, one which shows not only how to get lost but how it feels not to return.” Like Demmer, Yearley is looking for truthful narratives that do not so easily depend on courage, discipline, conquest, and fame. “This narrative has, instead, weakness, fluidity, concealment, and solitude as its hallmarks.” These “complicated heroes remain figures poised between the manifest but limited truths of ordinary life and the mysterious realm of the gods. They continue therefore to disclose, but to disclose only by indirection, even by refraction.”³³ Together, Connors and Yearley, by offering us stories and poetry, invite us “to let go” so as to see how we really get about.³⁴

Finally, while relying on the insights of Demmer on conscience, Tom Ryan offers us another remarkable reflection on moral wisdom by reminding us that the “experience of being summoned by a moral claim is common to

³⁰ Julio Martinez, *Moral social y espiritualidad: Una co(i)nspiracion necesaria* (Santander: Sal Terrae, 2011).

³¹ William C. Spohn, “The Formative Power of Story and the Grace of Indirection,” in *Seeking Goodness and Beauty: The Use of the Arts in Theological Ethics*, ed. Patricia Lamoureux and Kevin J. O’Neil, C.Ss.R. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005) 13–32.

³² Russell B. Connors Jr., “The Grace of Indirection and the Moral Imagination,” *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 345–68.

³³ Lee Yearley, “Ethics of Bewilderment,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010) 436–60, at 440. In a wonderful response to the essay, Francis X. Clooney focuses on how appropriately *religious* bewilderment is: “Bewilderment and Thereafter,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010) 461–67.

³⁴ See a related claim by Bernard Hoose, “Intuiting Moral Truth,” *Louvain Studies* 35 (2011) 53–68.

everyone.”³⁵ That experience, as diffuse as it is, is above all precognitive. Ryan refers to it as conscience and looks through recent church teachings to capture conscience as “primordial moral awareness.” Ryan’s essay complements well Connors’s indirection and Yearley’s bewilderment.

SIN AND MONEY

Connors’s reminder of the need to be vigilant of grace inevitably leads to an awareness of sin. Gary Anderson’s very successful *Sin: A History* is a biblical theologian’s study of how and why “debt” replaced burden, weight, or stain as the overriding metaphor for sin.³⁶

The singular concept of debt as something owed to another prompts us to recognize how fundamentally detrimental sin is to our relatedness with God, neighbor, and self. Unlike the weight, burden, and stain metaphors that all point to the effects sin has on the sinner, the debt/transactional language is decidedly interpersonal. In this new language, sin affects more than the sinner, an insight we can hardly overlook—think of Christ teaching us to forgive us our weights or stains as we forgive the weights and stains of others. Ethicists who insist on a fundamentally relational theological anthropology will find in Anderson’s language of sin as debt a hefty validation.

As significant as this finding about debt is, Anderson’s real contribution is in uncovering the exhaustive financial vocabulary that accompanied it (qua metaphors!): borrower, lender, credit, loan, redemption, etc. Might this new awareness make us as attentive to the matters of financial transaction as we are to sexual and marital commerce? If the biblical, metaphorical bonds are preeminently economic ones, and if debt did replace burden and stain, might we not be called to look more closely at our finances the way early, medieval, and early-modern church members did?

Clearly there is movement in this direction. As I write this note at the end of October 2011, Cardinal Peter K. A. Turkson, president of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, has just issued the document, *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority*.³⁷ In many ways this

³⁵ Tom Ryan, S.M., “Conscience as Primordial Moral Awareness in *Gaudium et Spes* and *Veritatis Splendor*,” *Australia eJournal of Theology* 18.1 (April 2011) 83–96, at 83.

³⁶ Gary A. Anderson, *Sin: A History* (New Haven: Yale University, 2009). For a reflection on Häring’s and others’ understanding of sin, see Vimal Tirimanna, “The Sinful Talk of Sin,” *Asian Horizons: Dharmaram Journal of Theology* 4.2 (2010) 441–51.

³⁷ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Towards Reforming the International Financial and Monetary Systems in the Context of Global Public Authority*, <http://www.news.va/en/news/full-text-note-on-financial-reform-from-the-pontif>.

statement is an outgrowth of economic positions articulated by Pope Benedict XVI in *Caritas in veritate*.³⁸ Though there are already certain questions about how feasible and effective global public authority can be in overseeing our financial systems,³⁹ still, there are effective strategies being networked worldwide.⁴⁰

More fundamental questions about the intersection of the economy and our moral lives need to be considered. In the meantime, in “Economics and Moral Theology: A Difficult Relationship,” Raphael Gallagher proposes that “an historically conditioned formulation of Christian anthropology is the most suitable contribution of moral theology to economic debate.”⁴¹ Similarly, Peter Henriot urges us to do “Economics as If People Really Mattered.”⁴²

SETTING AND LIVING THE AGENDA FOR LIVING THE TRUTH

The reader might notice here that, following Häring and Demmer, I am advocating that the way we write, the issues we consider, and our call to raise up with integrity the complexity and frailty of life strike me as the markings of a moral theology for the 21st century. We need to witness truthfully to human experience. In 2009 at the Catholic Theological Society of America, I argued similarly:

If we want to talk with more than ourselves, then we must develop more embodied, relational, practical, and narrative-based arguments to offer effective ways of addressing impasse in the world, the church and the academy today. We need to develop strategies that are more affectively evident, more emotionally resonant, more imaginatively developed, and more liberating for both the marginalized and

See Kevin Ahern’s synthesis, “Global Problems Require Global Governance: The Vatican’s Note on Financial Reform,” on the *Daily Theology* blog, <http://dailytheology.wordpress.com/2011/10/24/global-problems-require-global-governance-the-vatican’s-note-on-financial-reform/>.

³⁸ See Daniel K. Finn, ed., *The Moral Dynamics of Economic Life: An Extension and Critique of Caritas in Veritate* (New York: Oxford University, 2012); see also essays on the encyclical and economics by David Schindler, Nicholas Healy, and Andrew Abela in *Communio* 37.4 (2010); and by Domenico Santangelo and Martín Carbajo Núñez in *Studia moralia* 48.2 (2010) and 49.1 (2011) respectively.

³⁹ Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University, 2008).

⁴⁰ For example, the Catholic Peacebuilding network at the University of Notre Dame, <http://cpn.nd.edu/>.

⁴¹ Raphael Gallagher, “Economics and Moral Theology: A Difficult Relationship,” *Studia moralia* 49 (2011) 117–38, at 135. The entire volume of *Communio* 36.3 (2009) is dedicated to “Money.”

⁴² Peter Henriot, “Economics as If People Really Mattered,” in *Catholic Theological Ethics: Past Present, and Future; the Trento Conference*, ed. James F. Keenan (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011) 247–56.

the isolationist. We must therefore be suspicious when as academics we think that concepts and good critical thinking are rhetorically sufficient for addressing the challenges of the day.⁴³

There I referred to the work of a variety of people addressing ethics in this way; noteworthy, I remarked, were the writings of the newer generation of writers, who continue to highlight their interest in understanding the moral tradition in the light of personal commitment and community lives of faith. David Matzko McCarthy edited *The Heart of Catholic Social Teaching: Its Origins and Contemporary Significance* as a teaching resource for students who want to link the Catholic social justice tradition to contemporary challenges of life.⁴⁴ Tobias Winright edited an outstanding textbook for teaching on the environment, by using the resources of the Scriptures,⁴⁵ the moral tradition, systematic theology, and Catholic social ethics so as to live the practical life of Green discipleship.⁴⁶ Later Winright with Gerald Beyer, Alex Mikulich, and Emily Reimer-Barry⁴⁷ crafted a call for the abolition of the death penalty in the United States. Their statement arose as a protest of two state-sanctioned executions in the United States on September 21, 2011. Their work led to nearly 400 theologians from around the world joining them and mustering further opposition to these executions.⁴⁸ These theological ethicists realize that living the truth means living today with a defining conformity to Jesus Christ.

Charles Curran, besides being the senior Catholic ethicist of our time, has been the exemplar in conveying the complexity of truth in ordinary life while at the same time capturing in contemporary terms the living tradition

⁴³ James Keenan, "Impasse and Solidarity in Theological Ethics," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* 64 (2009) 47–60, at 55.

⁴⁴ Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos, 2009. Similarly, Roger Bergman provides a "faith" introduction to the Catholic social tradition in his *Catholic Social Learning: Educating the Faith That Does Justice* (New York: Fordham University, 2011).

⁴⁵ Two significant books on reading the Bible in light of nature and the environment are Allen Verhey, *Nature and Altering It* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010); and James Peterson, *Changing Human Nature: Ecology, Ethics, Genes and God* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010).

⁴⁶ Tobias Winright, ed., *Green Discipleship: Catholic Theological Ethics and the Environment* (Winona, Minn.: Anselm Academic, 2011). A worthy companion to that text is the second edition of Christine E. Gudorf and James E. Hutchingson, *Boundaries: A Casebook in Environmental Ethics* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2010). From Italy comes a translated collection, Matteo Mascia and Lucia Mariani, eds., *Ethics and Climate Change: Scenarios for Justice and Sustainability* (Padua: Fondazione Lanza, 2010).

⁴⁷ See Emily Reimer-Barry, "HIV Prevention for Incarcerated Populations: A Common Good Approach," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31 (2011) 179–201.

⁴⁸ See Tobias Winright, "A Catholic Call to Abolish the Death Penalty," <http://catholicmoralthology.com/a-catholic-call-to-abolish-the-death-penalty/>.

of the Church. Now he describes that tradition specifically through the Church's social mission.⁴⁹

From Curran to the newest scholar, theological ethicists are integrating into their arguments a more thorough engagement with the world and the church,⁵⁰ and for the most part, those leading us are visionary and practical women. Over the years, Lisa Sowle Cahill, Margaret Farley, and Christine Gudorf have insisted that we reflect on the complicated moral truth of lives actually lived. More recently Diana Fritz Cates's writing on emotions and Julie Hanlon Rubio's on family have pushed us to reflect viscerally and concretely on moral truth.⁵¹ In writing this note, I again find women authors bringing us to newer horizons of immediacy and urgency about human life. This is no surprise. Think of the challenges raised this year by the splendid theological work of Elizabeth Johnson in her *Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God*. Women are teaching the Church to think about matters deeply personal, as Marilyn Martone so effectively lets us know.

In the past two years six women have authored works that are refreshingly human and deeply resonant with living the truth: Cristina Traina, Shawn Copeland, Maureen O'Connell, Elizabeth Bucar, Elizabeth Cochran, and Jean Porter. I turn to them now.

Boston College's womanist M. Shawn Copeland urges us to remember the graphic, unadulterated truth about lives lived. Years ago, she invited us to listen anew to Negro spirituals. Then she noted that "the enslaved Africans sang because they saw in the rugged wooden planks One who had endured what was their daily portion. The cross was treasured because it enthroned the One who went all the way with them and for them."⁵²

In the spirituals we hear voices uttering a language of redemption through a language of resistance—what Copeland calls "sass." "Enslaved

⁴⁹ Charles E. Curran, *The Social Mission of the U.S. Catholic Church: A Theological Perspective* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2011).

⁵⁰ The Brazilian Society of Moral Theology dedicated their 2011 study to the topic of moral theology, uncertain times, and the need to teach urgently: Leo Pessini and Ronaldo Zacharias, eds., *Ser e educar: Teologia moral, tempo de incertezas e urgência educativa* (São Paulo: Santuario, 2011). Marcio Fabri dos Anjos writes about knowledge today as "quick, efficient, fascinating," in "Teologia moral e historia no contexto mundial inquieto," *ibid.* 13–36.

⁵¹ Diana Fritz Cates, *Aquinas on the Emotions: A Religious-Ethical Inquiry* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2009); and Julie Hanlon Rubio, *Family Ethics: Practices for Christians* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2010).

⁵² M. Shawn Copeland, "'Wading Through Many Sorrows': Toward a Theology of Suffering in a Womanist Perspective," in *Feminist Ethics and the Catholic Moral Tradition*, ed. Charles E. Curran, Margaret A. Farley, and Richard A. McCormick (New York: Paulist, 1996) 150.

Black women used sass to guard, regain, and secure self-esteem; to obtain and hold psychological distance; to speak truth; to challenge the atmosphere of moral ambiguity that surrounds them and sometimes to protect against sexual assault.”⁵³ Copeland teaches us that if we want to really understand suffering, we must listen to the real, experienced, articulate voice of the sufferer.

Now, nearly 15 years later, Copeland gives us *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, in which she reflects on embodiment and race to consider the truly awful stories of black women in the time of slavery and its enduring aftermath. In their bodies they were treated as objects of property, production, reproduction, and sexual violence. By turning to their lives, the lives of the long dead, in a meditation that could accompany, as she suggests, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Copeland seeks to liberate us from a house, the United States, “haunted by the ghosts of slavery.” Knowing that the “political memory of the nation suppresses our deep entanglement in slavery,” and that the attempt to totally erase any reminder of slavery is doomed to failure,⁵⁴ she raises “the aching memory of slavery” and “interrogates memory and history for the sake of freedom.” In the midst of stories of torture, sexual assault, and lynching, Copeland notes that therein, “black women began the healing of their flesh and their subjectivity in the *there-and-then*, in the midst of enslavement.” Calling us to “compassionate practices of solidarity,” Copeland takes us to the Eucharist, to the abiding presence of the risen Jesus through the lives of these women who were/are enfleshed in freedom.⁵⁵

In another work, “A Meditation on the Blues,” Copeland returns to music, but this time “to stand with the ordinary women, children and men who live the blues.” Like Demmer and Häring before her, she insists that theology is found where we hear and recognize lives as true. She takes us a little further than they do when she invites the black theologian to take on the identity of the blues musician, “who goes into the cross(roads) and steps into the dark and unknown.” There, she adds, “the theologian may

⁵³ Ibid. 152–53.

⁵⁴ At Trento, Bryan Massingale delivered a remarkable plenary address, “The Systemic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body in Catholic Ethics,” in Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics* 116–23. In his new work, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2010), he offers a theological manifesto for recognizing the historical effectiveness of racism, while proposing significant strategies for racial solidarity. See also the argument that attention to racial difference as a social perspective might get us to a richer notion of the way we can form societies: Ki Joo Choi, “Should Race Matter? A Constructive Ethical Assessment of the Postracial Ideal,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31 (2011) 103–22.

⁵⁵ M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010) 2–4.

meet a ragged, poor dark man of uncertain race and origin, who will take the theologian's mind and heart, tune them, and give them back for service to a suffering and crucified community."⁵⁶ We hear echoes of Demmer's insight: "It is impossible to think more radically than this of the conflictual history of humanity."

Fordham University's Maureen O'Connell has already contributed to the field of theological ethics in a multitude of ways. In *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization*,⁵⁷ she brings the reader into the immediacy and urgency of suffering, especially by her focus on the victims of hurricane Katrina. Using Johann Baptist Metz and Martha Nussbaum, she develops an activist agenda of compassion informed by understanding the causes of suffering, standing in solidarity with those who suffer, and working toward a shared view of human flourishing.

O'Connell has been engaging compassion in another venue, by using the neighborhood mural to capture the "reality" of lives lived. In a 2008 *Commonweal* article, "Painting Hope: The Murals of Inner-City Philadelphia," she presented a wide array of murals.⁵⁸ Though Philadelphia has registered the highest number of homicides in the nation, its 2,700 neighborhood murals also make Philadelphia the mural capital of the world.

Mindful of immediacy, O'Connell is equally aware of urgency. Quoting a colleague, she cites her thesis on the murals: "art saves lives." She sees the murals as her text, and they are as plaintive, strident, and hopeful as Copeland's spirituals. O'Connell leads us to hear the paintings, as they moan and look for relief, but also as they echo a firm hope that is as real as the lament.

With a bit of Russell Connor's glimpses of grace, O'Connell has recently argued that collaborative public art is a "viable resource for reframing or revisioning the common good in a way that counters its often conceptual, abstract, and pragmatic tendencies with an organic, self-critical, and creative relationality that arises from the mutually dependent transcendental categories of the beautiful, the true, and the good."⁵⁹ She is now completing a

⁵⁶ Copeland, "Theology at the Crossroads: A Meditation on the Blues," in *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience*, ed. M. Shawn Copeland with LaReine-Marie Mosely and Albert J. Raboteau (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2009) 97–107, at 104.

⁵⁷ Maureen O'Connell, *Compassion: Loving Our Neighbor in an Age of Globalization* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2009).

⁵⁸ O'Connell, "Painting Hope: The Murals of Inner-City Philadelphia," *Commonweal* 135.1 (January 18, 2008) 19–23.

⁵⁹ Maureen O'Connell, "Common Beauty and the Common Good: Theological Aesthetics and Justice in Urban America," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31 (2011) 123–41, at 123.

new book-length manuscript to be released later this year, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice*.⁶⁰

As motherhood drew Martone to take us over the waterfalls, Northwestern University's Cristina Traina's own maternal reflections in *Erotic Attunement: Parenthood and the Ethics of Sensuality between Unequals* ought to unleash an enormously (and much-needed) honest conversation about sexuality, desire, embodiment, and children. At a time when the laity wonder about the honesty and maturity of their clergy in sexual matters,⁶¹ Traina courageously and prudently explores the way we (ought to) love children. She invites us to explore the quality of "an agent's approach to the beloved." From pathological to life-giving approaches, she tries to untangle the erotic in order to get to an ethics of sensuality. In short, the book leads us to understand what constitutes an emotionally and sensually mature adult. But like other theological works on sexuality, it enters into the entire notion of the erotic fully aware of the irreducibility of the embodied subject in relation to the other.⁶²

From the University of North Carolina (Greensboro), Elizabeth Bucar offers *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women*. From the beginning we appreciate this remarkable work; she recounts an interview with Shahla Habibi, a prominent figure of post-Revolution national politics. In one question, Bucar refers to Habibi as an Islamic feminist. She responds: "I am not a feminist. Do not call me a feminist. I do not believe in your feminism."⁶³ Bucar realizes that Habibi had named something that only later she would understand, namely, that Bucar "had in mind a specific kind of conception of what freedom was for women, and was hearing only that type of freedom in her arguments." She

⁶⁰ Maureen O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 2012).

⁶¹ Besides Linda Hogan's "The Clerical Sexual Abuse Crisis: Ireland and Beyond," *Theological Studies* 72 (2011) 170–86, the writings of Louis Cartagenas are remarkable, both for capturing the Filipino crisis and for locating the crisis within the universal church; see his "The Terror of the Sexual Abuse by the Roman Catholic Clergy and the Philippine Context," *Asian Horizons* 5 (2011) 348–71; "The Abuse of Power within the Church: Its Impact on Identity, Reciprocity, and Familial Relations," in Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics* 235–46; "The problems of our own making . . . born from the sins within the Church: A Reading of Benedict XVI's Admission of the Crisis of the Church's Corporate Identity," *Philippiniana Sacra* 46 (2011) 631–48. Also, not to be missed is Laurenti Magesa's "Sublimating Desire: Reflections on the Problem of Sexual Abuse of Minors by Clergy," *Hekima Review* 44 (2011) 165–77.

⁶² See Antonio Autiero and Stefanie Knauss, eds., *L'Enigma corporeità: Sessualità e religione* (Bologna: EDB, 2010).

⁶³ Elizabeth M. Bucar, *Creative Conformity: The Feminist Politics of U.S. Catholic and Iranian Shi'i Women* (Washington: Georgetown University, 2011) xii.

tells us that her “assumptions about what women are or what they want limited my ability to see what they actually do.” Had Habibi not alerted her, her interviews could have “slid into a sort of academic ventriloquism” wherein she, and not Habibi, would be the subject of her own scholarship. But brilliantly, she does not let Habibi off the hook, either. The two are laden with opposing but equally evident and problematic presuppositions.⁶⁴ They must get to the truth of these women’s lives.

Bucar recognizes that both Catholicism and Shi’i Islam have antiliberal and antiwoman reputations. In that light she wants to demonstrate “how these liberal secular assumptions about these traditions are only partly correct and importantly misleading.” Her findings show that the practices of women in both local traditions “contribute to the ethical and political landscape in their respective religious communities.” In short, she is “challenging the orthodoxies of liberal feminist politics (a sort of fundamentalist feminism, if you will) in order to ultimately strengthen feminism as a scholarly endeavor.”⁶⁵ Like all these other women theologians, she resists the conceptual framework that has dominated the norms of discourse even in feminism itself, by offering an account of the actual rhetorical tactics of the women she interviewed.

Like Traina, Bucar offers a daring book that seeks to identify and name the ethical strategies of women, which are instructive for men and women seeking the true flourishing of their cultures.⁶⁶ Like Copeland, Bucar pursues the narratives of women’s lives actually lived, especially as they accommodate and at times subdue the conflicts intrinsic to the human condition and to the social constructs in which women live. Along the way, like the authors and their subjects, we too become suspicious of the conventional wisdom that has long tried to describe and propose a too simple and never-embodied agenda, whether that “wisdom” be articulated by the churches, the academy,⁶⁷ or the seductively domestic benevolence of local societies.

Recently Bucar allied with Grace Kao and Irene Oh to engage comparative religious ethics, but in the process they often highlight gender and sex

⁶⁴ Ibid. xiii.

⁶⁵ Ibid. xix.

⁶⁶ Here I find illuminating the work of Aline Kalbian, who often highlights “developments” where others see only more of the same—she is a bit of a feminist Noonan; see her “Catholics and Contraception since 1968: Has Anything Really Changed?” *Louvain Studies* 36.1 (2012) forthcoming. See also Julie Clague, “The Historicity and Progress of Morality: Some Catholic Contributions,” *Louvain Studies* 35 (2011) 200–215.

⁶⁷ Ethicists have long overlooked and failed to critique the academy; see my “(The Lack of) Professional Ethics in the Academy,” *Louvain Studies* 35 (2011) 98–116.

and related issues of language, embodiment, justice, and critique. True to their uncompromising method, “which subverts any political assumptions related to a particular matter,” they demonstrate how differing their own set of assumptions are: “At heart, these disagreements are rooted in a tension whether gender and sex are best used to ground a common morality or to unsettle it.”⁶⁸

In recent years virtue theory has merited increasing attention. Julia Annas’s *Intelligent Virtue*,⁶⁹ for instance, looks at the question of how developing a skill is like acquiring a virtue. Rather than explaining or justifying virtue by its symmetry with extant theories of ethics (about rules, principles, or ends of action), she suggests that virtue theory ought to reflect on lives as they are actually lived. In a manner of speaking, like so many other contributors, Annas looks not at the concept of an acquired skill, but at the actual, ordinary or practical way we do acquire skills. Aaron Stalnaker echoes caution on the embrace of skills, by acknowledging that while some skills could lead to moral excellence, not all do. Might we not want to elide the two, to have skillful virtues?⁷⁰ Like Annas, Daniel Daly looks at the relationship between virtues and ethical rules and norms, but rather than simply take what Aquinas injects about the matter, Daly looks at the rather pedestrian way that parents develop rules and norms for their children precisely so that they, in living the truth, might acquire the virtues for the good life.⁷¹

Duquesne’s Elizabeth Agnew Cochran first entered the discussion on virtue by reflecting on the Stoics and the Fathers.⁷² Now in *Receptive Human Virtues* she provides a study of Jonathan Edwards on the virtues. This work is a take on virtue theory from the perspective of the Reformation, and rightly so, as a study of America’s premier Puritan. While Edwards’s virtues are not acquired but received through grace, Cochran is mindful not to undermine a call to human responsibility and therefore

⁶⁸ Elizabeth M. Bucar, Grace Y. Kao, and Irene Oh, “Sexing Comparative Ethics: Bringing Forth Feminist and Gendered Perspectives,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010) 654–59, at 659.

⁶⁹ Julia Annas, *Intelligent Virtue* (New York: Oxford University, 2011).

⁷⁰ Aaron Stalnaker, “Virtue as Mastery in Early Confucianism,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010) 404–28. Elizabeth M. Bucar, “The Ambiguity of Moral Excellence: A Response to Aaron Stalnaker’s ‘Virtue as Mastery,’” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 38 (2010) 429–35.

⁷¹ Daniel Daly, “The Relationship of Virtues and Norms in the *Summa Theologiae*,” *Heythrop Journal* 51 (2010) 214–29.

⁷² Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, “Virtuous Assent and Christian Faith: Retrieving Stoic Virtue Theory for Christian Ethics,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 30 (2010) 117–40; “The *Imago Dei* and Human Perfection: The Significance of Christology for Gregory of Nyssa’s Understanding of the Human Person,” *Heythrop Journal* 50 (2009) 402–15.

sees in one's reception of virtue at once a moment of utter dependency and yet also a time of regeneration and empowerment. She treats Edwards on charity, humility, virtuous repentance, and justice.⁷³ In time, I believe, some of the most fundamental questions regarding the theological foundations of virtue ethics will be raised because of Cochran's pioneering work.

Finally, Notre Dame's Jean Porter, who has invited us to reconsider the virtues and to study the medieval nature and use of natural law, now offers us a contemporary synthesis on the law that grows out of her work on the Scholastic understanding of natural law. It is an investigation into and a defense of legal authority and provides a fundamental strategy for understanding law through the lens of Christianity. It is, in short, "an essay in systematic theological jurisprudence."⁷⁴

TRENTO

The 2010 Trento conference of Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church (CTEWC) served to stimulate theological ethicists toward living in solidarity with a much more concrete and urgent vision for moral truth. The plenary papers of the conference have been published.⁷⁵ Italy has seen a wide array of developments. Antonio Autiero and Marinella Perroni have edited a collection of essays on the challenges of today in light of the legacy of the Council of Trent.⁷⁶ The Redemptorists at the Alfonsianum have published a collection of their papers presented at Trento.⁷⁷ From Asia, Agnes Brazal edited a collection of papers originally delivered at Trento but later developed into longer works for a volume of the *Asian Christian Review*.⁷⁸ Papers published elsewhere have been posted on the CTEWC website.⁷⁹ A forum of essays are also published monthly by

⁷³ Elizabeth Agnew Cochran, *Receptive Human Virtues: A New Reading of Jonathan Edwards's Ethics* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University, 2011).

⁷⁴ Jean Porter, *Ministers of the Law: A Natural Law Theory of Legal Authority* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2010) 7. For a study of law, justice, and economics in a postmedieval era, see Diego Alonso-Lasheras, *Luis de Molina's De Iustitia et Iure: Justice as Virtue in an Economic Context* (Boston: Brill, 2011).

⁷⁵ Keenan, ed., *Catholic Theological Ethics*.

⁷⁶ Antonio Autiero and Marinella Perroni, eds., *Anatemi di ieri, sfide di oggi: Contrappunti di genere nella rilettura del concilio di Trento* (Bologna: EDB, 2011). See also, Paolo Prodi, *Il paradigma tridentino: Un'epoca della storia della chiesa* (Brescia: Morcelliana, 2010).

⁷⁷ Vincenzo Viva and Gabriel Witaszek, eds., *Etica teologica nelle correnti della storia* (Vatican City: Lateran University, 2011).

⁷⁸ Agnes Brazal, ed., *Catholic Moral Theology in a Pluralistic World*, a special issue of *Asian Christian Review* 5.1 (2011). Several other presentations were published in *Asian Horizons* 5.2 (2011).

⁷⁹ <http://catholicethics.com/articles>.

CTEWC. Their recent topics include the campaign to nationalize the mines in South Africa, political corruption in India, the Tsunami effects on Tokyo, travelling with hope on the Mexico City metro, the reproductive health bill in the Philippines, the toppling of Gaddafi, the need for north-south dialogue, obedient wives in Malaysia, and the study of bioethics in Latin America.⁸⁰

As it looks to the future, the planning committee of CTEWC has set August 21–22, 2012, for an African Regional Conference in Nairobi. The two-day expert seminar is entitled, “CTEWC in Africa after Trento: Engaging the African Synod.” Recently, Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator edited a collection of essays on the themes of the synod: reconciliation, justice, and peace. In it, the synod themes are engaged under five specific issues: interreligious dialogue, mission, gender, ecology, and HIV/AIDS. With compelling essays by Laurenti Magesa, Elias Omonodi Opongo, Anne Arabome, David Kaulem, Peter Knox, Yvon Elenga, Anthony Egan, Teresa Okure, Nathanael Yaovi Soede, Paulinus Odozor, Paterne Mombe, Peter Henriot, and Odomaro Muganbizi, among others, any reader can see that, like their colleagues around the world, these theological ethicists have set an agenda as urgent and as concrete as ever. Its truthfulness will be measured by its fidelity to the Christ-event unfolding daily in the lived histories of the people we serve.⁸¹

CONCLUSION

Early in his work in moral theology, Bernhard Häring made the fundamental decision to write about moral truth as it is experienced in the ordinary lives of contemporary Christians. As we celebrate the anniversary of his birth, we can see that his decision is one that animates the more successful works in theological ethics in recent years. When we focus on truth as it is lived, we come closer, I believe, to understanding truth itself. This is right; for those who believe in the revelation of Jesus Christ, this is the only way, after all, that we understand truth.

⁸⁰ <http://catholicethics.com/Forum>.

⁸¹ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, ed., *Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: The Second African Synod* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 2011).