

# The Roman Catholic conceptualisation of morality: Its essence and distinctive character

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Over the course of its history Catholicism has generated several different conceptions of morality. The early medieval church conceived morality primarily in terms of *caritas* and other virtues, the modern church generated a legalistic conception of morality, and the post-Vatican II church proposes a relational conception of morality.

**Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications:** The essence of morality concerns natural virtues and natural moral law, which all people of goodwill can grasp, appreciate, and act upon. The distinctive conception of morality is identified with our ultimate end, the beatific vision, the theological virtues, and the ethics of discipleship centred on *caritas*.

**Keywords:** morality; Thomas Aquinas; natural law; the 'new law'; justice.

## Introduction

This article seeks to answer the question: What is the essence and distinctive character of Roman Catholic conceptualisation of morality? The thesis of the article is that Roman Catholicism has generated three major conceptions of morality: morality as virtuous living, morality as licit conduct, and morality as rightly ordered relationships. All three conceptions share the belief that anyone who is reasonably reflective can grasp the basic norms of morality and cultivate the virtues appropriate to them. If the essence of morality is the 'natural moral law', the distinctiveness of this tradition lies in its conviction that we are created for union with God, empowered by grace to live the theological virtues, and find in Jesus Christ the definitive pattern of the Christian life.

This article proceeds in five stages that examine, in order, the meaning of the question this article addresses, the fundamental theological presuppositions of Catholic moral theology, the Thomistic conception of morality, the modern Catholic conception of morality, and the corrective approach to morality proposed by the Second Vatican Council, the contemporary relational conception of morality, and then the impact of the global church on contemporary conceptions of morality.

## Basic terms

We begin by identifying the meaning of key terms used in the question we mean to address. Firstly, the term 'conceptualisation' will be taken as referring to the formation and particular content of beliefs, ideas, or mental representations common to the Catholic moral tradition.

Secondly, the phrase 'Roman Catholic' includes the teachings of the Roman Catholic church, and also the practices of local communities around the world and the reflections of philosophers and theologians.<sup>1</sup> Thirdly, the term 'morality' has many meanings and no single formulation satisfies everyone using it (see Gert 2020).<sup>2</sup> The Catholic tradition generally treats morality and ethics interchangeably.

The word 'moral' is taken from the Latin *mores* just as 'ethics' is an English rendering of the Greek *ethos*. Both terms refer to a particular people's customs or 'habits of the heart', the way they conduct themselves, and what they consider valuable and important (or not). The Catholic intellectual

1. The church considers those who no longer attend services, and even those who consider themselves disaffiliated, 'lapsed' Catholics. While this accords with canon law, the fact that someone happens to have undergone infant baptism or childhood confirmation does not in itself say anything about whether they have taken the faith seriously enough to have developed a Catholic conception of morality (one might call to mind, among others, Vito Genovese of *The Godfather*).

2. Ordinary discourse often treats the terms 'morality' and 'ethics' interchangeably. Philosophers, in contrast, often conceive of morality as marked by impartial norms that govern relations between strangers as distinguished from ethics as referring to a person's pursuit of a good life (Ricoeur 1992; Williams 1985).

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tradition takes the domain of 'morality' to include anything involving the exercise of our powers of agency, and particularly (but by no means exclusively) our volitional capacities. Every truly human act is considered a moral act (ST, I-II,18,8, in Aquinas 1946:vol. 2:668). It is moral both in the sense that it is voluntary and reasonably well-informed, and therefore something for which a moral agent is responsible and in the sense that in some way or other it pertains to the human good, that is, what contributes to true human flourishing or happiness in an objective rather than purely subjective sense. Morality has to do not only with 'action guidance', decision procedures, and impartial norms (the concern of many secular moral theories) but also the attitudes, affections, imagination, virtues, and character of the moral agent. As this domain concerns whatever is relevant to the human good, it also constitutes a dimension of the whole range of human activities from science and technology to music and the arts. For this reason, we can subject any human act, practice, or policy to moral assessment (without necessarily doing so in a moralistic way).

## Theological presuppositions

Philosophers and theologians have typically tried to explicate the meaning and use of moral concepts with some clarity, depth, and thoroughness. We can distinguish formal from informal conceptions of morality. *Informal* modes of conceptualising morality communicated throughout communities and expressed 'common sense' aphorisms, sayings, exemplary figures, folklore, cautionary tales, and the like. They blend Catholic values with those of the host culture. Informal modes are much more pervasive and influential than formal modes of conceptualising morality.

*Formal* modes of conceptualisation are found in systematic analyses of normative morality such as those produced by scholars working in 'high culture'. Roman Catholic conceptions of morality have been produced by philosophers and theologians reflecting on how to lead a Christian life (personally and collectively) in their own particular historical contexts. This deep and diverse intellectual tradition includes the writings of the monk Cassian (+535, Gaul), the Italian scholastic Thomas Aquinas (+1274), the English lawyer Thomas More (+1535, England), the Spanish missionary Bartolomé de las Casas, O.P. (+1566, Madrid), and the Spanish mystical theologian Teresa of Avila (+1582). It is misleading to speak of *the* Roman Catholic conceptualisation of morality as if it were analogous to Aristotelian, Kantian, or utilitarian moral theories. Catholicism has sponsored Augustinian, Thomist, Scotist, transcendental, liberationist, or other particular Catholic 'schools' of theology. They do not all share an identical conception of morality, so it is probably best to speak of Roman Catholic conceptions of morality in the plural.

Like other Christian traditions, the Roman Catholicism reveres the Bible as 'sacred Scripture', that is, as a collection of writings produced by human authors inspired by the Holy Spirit and communally recognised as expressing God's self-communication to us about truths pertaining to faith and morals ('divine revelation' in Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*). Catholics

take Scripture to be inerrant in matters concerning our redemption, reconciliation with God, and salvation (but even here there is significant room for theological interpretation). Christian morality is essentially biblical morality in that its essential standards are taken from Scripture.

Christians share the belief that Jesus gave to his apostles a special responsibility to preserve and hand on the fullness of the truth he had taught them (see Mt 16:19; Mt 18:18). The distinctiveness of the Roman Catholic tradition lies in the claim that Jesus assigned to Peter and his successors (the bishops of Rome) a special responsibility to care for the church by preserving its fidelity and unity. The 'magisterium' is the doctrinal teaching authority of the church (Gaillardetz 2018). According to Catholic doctrine, the college of bishops, along with the pope as its head bear a unique responsibility to provide the 'authoritative interpretation' of Scripture when necessary (see Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 10). They are called to identify misinterpretations (e.g., when ancient Gnostics denied that Jesus of Nazareth was truly human) and morally perverse misuses of Scripture (e.g., by 20th century Christians who used it to justify anti-Semitism).

The phrase 'Roman Catholicism' points to its twofold character as both particular ('Roman') and universal ('catholic'). Theologically speaking, this inclination to see an underlying unity shared by distinct realities is grounded in the Incarnation, the core Christian doctrine that in Jesus 'the Word became flesh' (Jn 1:14). The union of divine and human natures in Jesus lies behind the distinctively Catholic sensitivity to ways in which divine love (or grace) is active throughout the human life-span (Radcliffe 2005).

Emphasis on the Incarnation also supports the Catholic tendency to look for analogical ('both-and') harmonies rather than dialectical ('either-or') oppositions (Tracy 1981). This framework leads Catholics to expect an essentially complementary rather than oppositional relationship between creation and redemption, grace and freedom, law and gospel, science and faith, philosophy and Scripture, Christ and culture, and reason and revelation (John Paul II 1998). In morality, this sensibility presupposes a fundamental harmony between divine law and natural law, mercy and justice, conscience and authority, theological virtues, and acquired virtues.

This emphasis on incarnation is complemented by a rich theological anthropology that can only be briefly summarised here. As a species, we are relatively intelligent, free and morally responsible, social animals. We are created in the image of God and therefore bear an intrinsic dignity, moral duties to others, and a special calling to love and revere God and to live in ways that bear witness to God's goodness. We are born with great potential but need to be taught how to love well, reason properly, and order our personal and communal lives wisely. Simply as a natural human institution, morality at its best answers to fundamental human needs we have as intelligent social animals. Morality, properly construed, is also the context for learning how to love God, self, and neighbour rightly.

This theological anthropology also provides an eudemonistic framework for understanding both morality and spirituality. We all experience a desire to lead meaningful lives marked by authentic friendship and love. This experience reflects the fact that we are created with a desire for true and complete fulfilment. This deep desire is finally satisfied only by union with God that begins in this life but is only fully realised in the kingdom of God (i.e., eschatologically). The real purpose of morality is to help people, both individual persons and communities, flourish. As will, the natural moral promotes comprehensive human flourishing in this life and the life of discipleship constitutes the path to 'eternal life' (Jn 10:10). The latter includes but transcends the goals of the former.

## Thomas Aquinas' conception of morality

We now turn to Thomas Aquinas' conception of morality because he provides the most comprehensive account of morality in the Catholic tradition. We will focus first on his treatment of both natural (acquired) virtues and the natural law and then turn to his account of the 'New Law' and the (graced) theological virtues. Aquinas' conception of morality can be summarised as a virtue-centred Christian eudaimonism. He developed an account of the natural moral law as a component of his overarching neo-Platonic theological framework within which all creatures emanate from God and return to God (O'Meara 1997).

Aquinas' overarching eudaimonism justifies moral standards in terms of their contribution to human flourishing both in this life ('imperfect beatitude') and the next ('perfect beatitude'). These moral standards include both natural 'virtues', steady and deep-seated habits of the good normally acquired by proper training, education, and practice, and 'precepts' (or what we might call 'deontic' norms).

Aquinas is well-known for having proposed a carefully crafted theory of natural law ethics. This work was the culmination of generations of theologians working on this concept (Porter 1999). This accomplishment has unfortunately led many Christians to think of him primarily as an exponent of naturalistic morality and therefore to miss the fundamentally theological character of his moral theology that we can see at work even in his analysis of the different kinds of law. He defined law as an 'ordinance of reason for the common good, made by him who has care of the community, and promulgated' (*ST I-II,90,4*, at Aquinas, vol. 1:995). He distinguishes various kinds of law: eternal law (the wise divine governance of the creation), natural law (the 'rule and measure' that pertains to the rational creature, i.e., human beings), human law (the particular positive laws determined by human beings seeking to order their common life), and divine law (i.e., divine revelation about human conduct) (*ST I-II, 91*, at Aquinas, vol. 1:996–1001).

Natural law is the rational creature's way of participating in the eternal law. As an intelligent group living animals, we only thrive to the extent that our social relations are regulated

in reasonably ordered and just ways. We are created to govern ourselves by the exercise of our capacity for practical reason and we flourish when we do so regularly within a community that is reasonably well-ordered. We can employ reason to identify and rank the various kinds of natural goods that contribute to our well-being (Porter 2004).

The moral law rooted in human nature and displayed in the daily lives of good people whether or not they are Christian (here his ethic is less sceptical of 'pagan virtues' than was Augustine) is what we might call 'basic morality'. Natural law morality can guide right external conduct but it also requires proper internal habits of heart and mind. Its consistent implementation, then, is accomplished only by agents capable of exercising the moral virtues. In purely philosophical terms, natural law morality is only consistently exemplified by those who exercise the cardinal virtues.

Aquinas was confident that any reasonably intelligent human being – Christian or otherwise – can know the content of golden rule and its specification in the precepts of the second table of the Decalogue. He recognised that average people are naturally capable of reasoning together about the implications of these basic norms for how they lead their lives and structure their communities (Porter 2016). Careful reflection on the exigencies of our social life can see the reasonableness of the basic or natural law requirements of justice.

This confidence in our epistemological access to the natural moral law puts Aquinas at odds with important aspects of what would in the next century would become early divine command theory (Hare 2015) and, in the late 20th century, some forms of narrative ethics (De Villiers 2012; Hauerwas 1981). As rational creatures we do not need divine revelation to know it is wrong to murder, steal, lie, or commit sexual infidelity. God reveals these norms in Scripture to provide clarity, but Aquinas thought any reasonably reflective and well-raised person acknowledges their ethical legitimacy and value for communal living.

While acknowledging the legitimacy and value of the natural virtues and the natural moral law, Aquinas, first and foremost a man of faith, was much more interested in the theological virtues, the 'new law', and the beatific vision. He recognised that we only know of our supernatural end, the beatific vision, from divine revelation.

The Christian life consists essentially as a participation in the 'new law', the indwelling grace of the Holy Spirit given to those who believe in Christ (O'Meara 1997; *ST I-II,106*, in Aquinas, vol. 1:1103–1108). The transformative power of grace enables Christians to not only try to live up to the basic requirements of the natural law (such as the golden rule) but also calls them to even higher standards. The central theological virtue is *caritas*, the Latin translation of *agape*, which Aquinas understood to be the believer's grace-infused friendship with God and love of every creature 'in God'. Grace inspires in the believer not only the theological virtues

but also the infused moral virtues of prudence, justice, temperance, and fortitude. Included in the catalogue of Christian virtues are patience, meekness, humility, forbearance, mercy, and other virtues praised in the New Testament. Christians find essential support for doing so in participating in the life of the church and partaking in her sacraments.

Whereas all reasonable people can be expected to conform to the requirements of the natural moral law, the Christian life involves duties and aspirations that transcend the natural law and are therefore not expected to be adhered to by non-Christians. The 'higher righteousness' of the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 5–7) can be taken as a short summary of the essence of the Christian life (Pinckaers 1998, 2009). Aquinas understood all Christians – and not just monks and mendicants – all Christians are called to this 'higher righteousness' (Pinckaers 1999:19–21).

This framework regards the natural moral law as necessary but not sufficient for the end for attaining the end for which we are created. For one thing, we learn from revelation (rather than reason) that we are created for friendship with God and the communion of saints. For another, our natural moral capacities have been seriously compromised by both the original sin into which we are all born and our own particular sinful tendencies, debilitating moral weaknesses, intellectual blind spots, and spiritual immaturity. Sin, both original and actual, pervades human life and makes living up to the precepts of the natural law (let alone the ethics of discipleship) very difficult, if not impossible.

What is perhaps Aquinas' most famous axiom – that 'grace perfects rather than destroys nature' (Aquinas 1946, *ST*, I,1,8 ad 2; vol. 1:6) – registers at once both the value and the shortcomings of 'nature' and the natural law regarding our true happiness. He distinguished but did not separate natural law and the 'new law'. The latter goes beyond but does not negate the former. Natural law requires us to respect one another's property but *caritas* invites us to put our surplus at the service of the poor. Natural law forbids adultery but the Christian life resists giving a foothold to the vice of lust. Natural law allows a victim to resist unjust personal aggression, but the Gospel encourages us to 'turn the other cheek' and respond to evil with love. The natural law provides moral standards respected by all decent people, but the Gospel calls us to a way of life shaped by the *imitatio Christi*. This conception of Christian morality includes both the solid 'floor' of natural law morality (to which all human beings are accountable) and the open 'ceiling' of the kenotic Christ-patterned love of God and neighbour (Mt 22:37). The former is 'nested' within the latter.

There is much more to the Catholic tradition than Thomism,<sup>3</sup> but Aquinas' major convictions about the complementary relationship of grace and nature, faith and reason, and

3. A longer article would also have to examine the Augustinian strain within Catholic theology represented by Bernard of Clairvaux (+1153) and the Franciscans Bonaventure (+1274) and John Duns Scotus (+1308). It would also have to take into account the development of natural law theory in the writings of the Salamanca scholastics Francisco de Vitoria (+1547) and Francisco Suarez, S.J. (+1617).

temporal and eternal fulfilment have exerted an enormous influence on Catholic conceptions of morality. In principle (if not always in practice), Catholicism is open to insights about human nature (including the natural basis of morality) that might be forthcoming from other sources of wisdom, including philosophy, music and the arts, literature, the natural and social sciences, and ordinary experience. We see this tendency in Patristic critical appropriation of Stoicism and Neo-Platonism, Aquinas' dependence on the Roman notion of 'natural law', and late medieval Nominalist use of Greco-Roman virtue theory.

The four principles of modern Roman Catholic social teachings provide a prime example. The principles of subsidiarity and the common good were taken from Greco-Roman philosophers and then used to support the rights of labour and to counter totalitarianism and fascism (Himes 2018). The egalitarian conception of human dignity and its connection to human freedom was developed by Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers and was adopted and given a new theological reformulation in the great social encyclicals of Popes John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul II. Human dignity in Catholicism is grounded in the *imago Dei* rather than in the rational agent's capacity for autonomy. The principle of solidarity first appeared in 19th century secular philosophy and social theory before they were taken up and transformed by liberation theologians in Latin America and elsewhere and then by the magisterium (Hollenbach 2002). These four key principles have theological foundations in the doctrines of creation, incarnation, and eschatology, but they can and often do appeal to non-Catholics because they promote just and fair access to essential human goods recognised by all reasonable people (Himes 2018).

## Historical consciousness and recent Catholic conceptions of morality

Historians have identified major shifts in the Catholic moral tradition. We will briefly notice the dominant emphasis on virtue up through the high Middle Ages and then a shift to a highly legal conception of morality in the modern period (roughly from the mid-16th to mid-20th centuries, largely reflecting the church's defensive reaction to the rise of Protestantism, the Enlightenment, and the French Revolution) (O'Malley 2010). During this phase, modern Roman Catholicism developed a well-deserved reputation for legalism, rigidity, and authoritarianism (Mahoney 1987). Beginning with the Second Vatican Council, the church has tried in various ways to move away from a strongly obligation centred conception of morality and into a conception of morality that is more personalist and relationship-centred.

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), building on a century of work by theologians on the significance of historicity, sought to recover a more biblical, pastoral, Christ-centred view of the Christian moral life. The Council inaugurated a sweeping and ambitious ecclesiological change from a predominantly institutional model of the church 'above' the world to a more communitarian church 'in'



and 'for' the world. Morality is no longer conceived primarily as a large and fixed collection of absolute rules (mostly prohibitions), but rather as a thoroughly historical institution that is subject to modification and development in the light of emergent and pressing social needs (the 'signs of the times'). Historical consciousness brought an expansion of moral concern beyond the probity or sinfulness of individual acts (particularly regarding violations of sexual purity) and onto structural injustices such as poverty, racism, sexism, and xenophobia. This emerging conception of morality was highly social and communal.

A new kind of challenge for the teaching authority of the magisterium was occasioned by the intense debate in the late 1960s over the impermissibility of artificial contraception (Mahoney 1987:ch. 7). The debate *Humanae Vitae* (1968) essentially constituted a clash of the older law-centred deontological conception of morality against an emergent and more creative personalist view of morality. Many Catholics were not convinced by Pope Paul VI's attempt to repackage the old legal prohibition in a more personalist language. John Paul II took the same approach with no more success.

Since then, progressive theologians have unsuccessfully urged the magisterium to replace the older law-centred mentality with a more person-centred conception of morality (Cahill 1996; Cahill in Lacey & Oakley 2011; Mahoney 1987). Some progressive theologians thought it best to replace natural law categories with an ethic of responsibility (Curran & McCormick 1991) but others tried to develop a more dynamic, historically conscious version of natural law. The latter appeal to an account of natural human goods to challenge unhelpful church norms (Cahill 1996; Cahill in Lacey & Oakley 2011; Mahoney 1987). Analysis of particular teachings have sometimes provoked significant historical development, for example, regarding the ethical legitimacy of charging interest on loans, the permissibility of capital punishment, and the right to religious freedom (Noonan 2005).

Catholic theologians today tend to invoke a compassionate and 'relational' rather than harshly 'judgmental' image of God. This shift from a more juridical to a more personalist image of God, often grounded in social Trinitarian theology, has led to a more personalist and relational conception of morality. Moral laws have not been discarded, but they are valued primarily because they can play a constructive role in forming and supporting right relationships and the virtues needed to sustain them.

This shift in conceptions of morality is especially seen in moral theologians' heightened appreciation for the central place of love in the Christian life. *Caritas*, the grace-inspired love of God and love of neighbour, is the primary Christian virtue and the animating heart of Christian morality. Our moral duty to love God (in the sense of trust, obey, remain loyal to, and believe God) cannot be detached from our obligation to love our neighbour. Love of the neighbour

refers primarily to 'benevolence', that is, willing the good to another. Recent Catholic ethics have come to appreciate that the love of God extends not only to the love of the neighbour but also to love of the self (Vacek 1994:239–279 and Fozard Weaver 2002) and love of non-human creatures (Pope Francis 2015).

This emphasis on *caritas* implies a tighter relation between salvation and morality than one finds in Protestant traditions endorsing the formula of salvation by faith alone. Morality in fact provides the key litmus test for the authenticity of one's faith (Mt 25:31–45). To love one's neighbour consistently demands a host of complementary and interdependent virtues such as mercy, justice (or righteousness), hospitality, humility, patience, kindness, forgiveness, forbearance, and the like. Distinctively Christian virtues are complemented by norms governing specific kinds of conduct, for example, the virtue of humility prohibits boasting or other acts of vainglory. A person shaped by the virtue of *caritas* strives to go beyond the obligations of justice, for example, by engaging in corporal and spiritual works of mercy (feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, pardoning the sinner, etc.) (Day 1997).

No Catholic conception of morality regards love as a substitute for justice. On the contrary, *caritas* at the very least insists that every neighbour be treated justly. The requirement of justice also applies to institutions as well as to individuals. There is no theological justification for the assertion that Christians must love each individual neighbour they encounter but have no duty to be concerned with social justice or work to change the unjust institutions that unfairly harm their neighbours.

The Catholic moral vision is motivated by a Christian rather than secular form of humanism, but it wants to find common ground with all people of good will. Cahill strikes the right balance when she writes:

Christian concepts of grace, salvation, and virtue are already embedded in the new personal and social, which is to say moral and political, relationships of God's reign. And those relationships are never just 'Christian' or among Christians, but are always 'human,' joining people who participate in many types or layers of community at once, especially in our pluralistic and global age. (Cahill 2013:248)

Promoting a social as well as personal conception of morality, Roman Catholicism has a characteristic tendency to translate these values, norms, and aspirations into concrete organisations with specific missions to serve the needy. This institutional concern lies behind medieval associations formed to ransom captives, bury the dead, or care for victims of the plague. It gave rise to institutions such as hospitals, clinics, schools, and universities. It also gave rise to the establishment of modern institutions such as homeless shelters, soup kitchens, and refugee centres (Hollenbach 2008).

## Relational morality in a global context

The growing Catholic conception of morality as fundamentally relational is grounded in sacramentality. The church regards the seven sacraments as special ritual practices that enable participants to celebrate and embrace God's grace more deeply in their own lives and to cooperate with that grace in their engagement with the wider world. The 'sacramental imagination' is attuned to the quiet but powerful presence of grace in the everyday realities of human existence, for example, in the family, workplace, neighbourhood, and elsewhere (Godzieba 2008; Greeley 2000; Rahner 1959, 1963). This framework encourages believers to cultivate a special sensitivity to the moral dimensions of every concrete human relationship (Rahner 1969).

Sometimes informal conceptualisations of morality at the grassroots have a long-term influence on the revision of formal conceptualisations of morality and vice versa. Catholic ethics is marked by continuity across time and place regarding the obligation to adhere to fundamental moral norms and the cross-cultural legitimacy of basic human virtues such as practical wisdom, justice, compassion, courage, and the like. Formal agreement on moral standards is compatible with some concrete material diversity about how we are best to conceive of these standards in particular local contexts, for example, what counts as justice among agriculturalists in rural Kenya may not have much overlap with what counts as justice in corporate America.

The Second Vatican Council showed a much greater awareness of the church as a global community. While most representatives at the Council were European, the emerging awareness of the global church set the conditions for the transition from the older vision of the church as an essentially white, European community with outreach to the missions to a truly global church in which the majority of the baptised are brown people living in the global South. We see a tangible acknowledgement of this shift in the election of the first pope from Latin America (or indeed anywhere from the global South).

The postconciliar turn to the 'world Church' has become increasingly expansive in the 21st century. The natural law underpinning of Catholic conception of morality, and particularly its trust in human intelligence, gives it a fundamental openness to ways in which particular cultures yield valuable insights into the human good. The church as a whole is increasingly recognising the wisdom of communities relegated to the margins of most societies, particularly when it comes to communitarian values and environmental responsibility. Cahill relates natural law ethics to ecological responsibility when she writes that:

[B]asic human equality yields an obligation to ensure that all have access to the minimum conditions of human sustenance. This implies, at the very least, that our common human environment be protected as a prerequisite of human flourishing. The process of naming ecological goods and responding to

ecological dangers should be inclusive of all those affected. (Cahill 2013:281)

Despite the theological transition to a more relational conception of God, the church, and morality, Catholics around the world generally continue to assume that morality is a system of rules taught by the church. Many Catholics do not have an expansive, relational view of morality as encouraging compassion, personal integrity, a just social order, and right relationship to God, neighbour, self, and creation. This is partly a challenge to education and evangelisation, that is, inviting believers to deepen the grasp of Christian faith and morals.

A related challenge comes from secularism, the complex set of modern processes that have led to a decline in religious attendance, church affiliation, and, more broadly, religious sensibility. The 'disenchantment' that marks modern secularism and its 'immanent frame' affects Catholics and their conception of morality as much as anyone else (Taylor 1991, 2007).<sup>4</sup> Forces of secularisation in Europe and North America have led to a significant drop off of church affiliation, particularly in places such as Ireland that were the sites of widespread clerical sex abuse and subsequent cover-ups by church authority. Matters are made worse in the United States, where the bishops who have fuelled the 'culture wars' have reinforced the widespread perception that the church promotes a morality obsessed with absolute prohibitions of various kinds of medical procedures (e.g., stem cell research and abortion) and a wide of array of sexual activities that have become increasingly acceptable in modern popular cultures (e.g., premarital sex, cohabitation, and marriage after divorce).

Catholics in Western liberal democracies such as the Netherlands and Ireland increasingly accept some forms of behaviour (such as same sex relations) that Catholics in more traditional, honour-sensitive cultures such as Bosnia and Nigeria find abhorrent (see Diamant 2020). Whatever one thinks of this particular moral issue, or others like it, this tendency probably represents less a shift to a new Catholic conception of morality than its abandonment and replacement with an ethic of individual autonomy.

Pope Francis' whole pontificate has been aimed at making the church less impersonal, rigid, and bureaucratic and more merciful, accepting, and hospitable. While not denying the need for the moral law, the pope has tried to change the tone of contemporary Catholic moral culture. He conceives of morality primarily in terms of compassion expressed in interpersonal relationships and loving outreach to people who exist on the periphery of the community (Pope Francis 2013). His deeply relational conception of morality strongly resists both the 'culture wars' and the increased radical individualism and consumerism of modern cultures. He repeatedly reminds us of what we can learn from indigenous

4. Philosopher Charles Taylor distinguishes three kinds of modern secularism: the elimination of religion from public life, the decline of religious belief, belonging, and practice, and 'the conditions of experience of and search for the spiritual' that make it possible to speak of ours as a 'secular age'. Taylor (2007:3).

cultures about care for the earth (Pope Francis 2015) and from popular movements about social injustice (Pope Francis 2020).

## Conclusion

This article has tried to distinguish the essential from distinctive dimensions of Catholic conceptualisations of morality. We have sketched the differences between three major conceptions of morality – virtue-centred, law-centred, and relationship-centred, respectively. Most contemporary Catholic theologians agree on the value of all three concepts but differ over their relative priority. Those who worry about moral relativism place a high value on the moral law, those who worry about legalism place a high value on cultivating the virtues, and those who worry about marginalisation place a high value on relationality. All three have valid concerns and point to values worthy of protection.

Despite all the diversity within the church, we can still venture the claim that the Catholic conception of morality is centrally grounded in its vision of comprehensive human flourishing promoted by virtues and moral laws. We can distinguish in this vision both what is essential and what is distinctive.

Firstly, the *essential* features of any Catholic conception of morality lies in its analysis of the natural moral law and the acquired virtues – moral standards that, in principle, every reasonable person can understand. ‘Essential’, the operative term here, is understood as basic or elementary. Put in an evolutionary context, morality is a human institution that was slowly developed by our remote ancestors, intelligent social animals, who developed modes codes that would function to protect and promote their individual and collective well-being. A Catholic conception of morality will convey a basic confidence in the natural ability of human beings to reason together about what is right and wrong and about the kind of a community they want to be. Most fundamentally, this conception holds that reasonable people will acknowledge the normative truth of the golden rule and recognise the basic moral norms of justice that accord with it.

Secondly, the most obvious *distinctive* feature of the Catholic conceptualisation of morality lies primarily in its theological vision of eschatological human flourishing and the theological virtues that enable us to pursue it. We have seen that Catholicism takes its primary theological bearing from the incarnation and the conviction that Jesus Christ definitively reveals to us the full meaning of our humanity and this necessarily means the full meaning of morality. This vision is distinctive in its source (grace), end (union with God), way of life (Christ-patterned), and sustaining community (the church). It also gives rise to a set of distinctive attitudes – emblematically portrayed in the Sermon on the Mount – that cannot be justified on the basis of the natural moral law alone.

We can conclude that both aspects of the Catholic conception of morality are both essential and distinctive in their own ways. The theological virtues are most ‘essential’ if one has in

mind attaining the final end. The natural moral law, however, is most ‘essential’ if by that we mean most easily connected to the ‘essence’ of the human person, that is to ‘human nature’.

The theological virtues are most distinctive when compared with the acquired virtues in that they are rarer, more explicitly connected to the Gospel, and less intelligible to secular people of good will than are the acquired virtues. But the concept of natural law is more distinctive within Christianity in that Catholic theologians are much more prone to use this language than are other Protestant theologians (but see Doe 2017:chs. 4–8; VanDrunnen 2014). In some contexts, then, we can say that the Catholic conception of morality as including both the natural moral law and the life of grace are, in different respects, both essential and distinctive. This is especially the case when we see them in their intrinsic unity rather than dichotomise them. Doing so of course suits a perspective grounded in the claim that ‘grace perfects nature’.

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## Author’s contributions

S.J.P. is the sole author of this article.

## Ethical considerations

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## Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

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