

Finding Common Ground in Catholic Moral Theology

Regina Wentzel Wolfe, Ph.D.

Catholic Theological Union

rwolfe@ctu.edu

In 2001, I began a five-year term as Executive Director of the Society of Christian Ethics, a position that provided me with an opportunity to meet young aspiring Catholic theologians studying moral theology or, as it is more commonly being called, theological ethics. Since that time, I have had the privilege of watching many of them grow and develop into world-class theologians. I've also come to appreciate the manner in which they engage in the many and varied theological conversations that occur in the area of moral theology. I believe that the work of this next generation of moral theologians pushes us beyond the divide that for many years has existed in contemporary moral theology.

With that in mind, I want to begin with a bit of background in order to provide a context for my remarks. This will be followed by a short description of "New Wine, New Wineskins", an initiative of this next generation of moral theologians. Finally, I want briefly to look at articles written by three theologians who are representative of this next generation in an effort to give you a sense of how they are attempting to bridge the divide that they've inherited.

As we know, and no doubt will be reminded next year on its fiftieth anniversary, the Second Vatican Council "Decree on Priestly Formation" (*Optatam Totius*) called for the renewal of moral theology. The bishops noted that is to "be renewed through a more living contact with the mystery of Christ and the history of salvation. Special care must be given to the perfecting of moral theology. Its scientific exposition, nourished more on the teaching of the Bible, should shed light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world." [OT16] Of course prior to the decree, theologians such as Joseph Fuchs and Bernhard Häring were already engaged in renewal, moving away from what was seen as a narrow focus on sin and the preparation of confessors. For me, one of the signs of the changes that were taking place is seen in Häring's shift in title from *The Law of Christ* for his 1954 three-volume pre-conciliar work to *Free and Faithful in Christ* for his 1979 three-volume post-conciliar work.

Arguably, the most significant event to impact moral theology was the promulgation of *Humanae Vitae*. The expectations of many that the church would change its teaching on the issue of contraception were dashed, while others were pleased that the church's traditional teachings, on contraception in particular and in the area of in the area of sexuality more generally, were maintained. The divide that followed is still with us today and across the years spilled over to other issues in sexual ethics, in medical ethics, and in social ethics. It is this divide that many of the next generation of Catholic moral theologians are attempting to overcome in a deliberate and intentional way.

New Wine, New Wineskins

In 2002, a group of young theologians, mostly graduate students, joined together to form an organization that "seeks to create an atmosphere of friendship, mutual respect, dialogue,

academic enrichment, and charity in which Catholic moral theologians in the early stages of their careers may gather for a common formation experience where participants are invited to explore the vocation of the moral theologian as committed to the common good of the Church, the academy, and the societies in which we live and work."¹ They commit themselves to developing a network and community built on fellowship and trust, so that they might engage in academic inquiry "where ideas are shared, discussed, and critiqued in an environment of safe and charitable exchange."² They are not naive or unaware of the challenges of such an approach and clearly note, "We recognize the potential for increased polarization in the field of moral theology, and therefore seek to foster an atmosphere of mutual respect and charitable exchange between those of all backgrounds and perspectives. One of the founding goals of New Wine New Wineskins has always been to create a space for dialogue beyond the ideological divides that prevent authentic and creative exchange of ideas."³

Membership is restricted to doctoral candidates who have finished their comprehensive exams and pre-tenured faculty, so many of the early participants, like my CTU colleague, Maria Cimperman, are moving toward mid-career and leadership roles in the discipline. Maria tells me that when she was involved, many of them were from Boston College, Duke, and Notre Dame and definitely held different perspectives, but all of them were seeking conversations beyond liberal-conservative divides and beyond labels; the one place that they found common ground was around the virtues.⁴

In what I think points to the ethos of the organization, she noted, "It was interesting, too, that our sharing included praying together and that was important to us." This also reflects another of the New Wine, New Wineskins commitments, the commitment to vocation and an awareness of their role as theologians in the life of the Church and the world.

I'd like to turn to three theologians and present an example from each of their work so you can have a sense of the way in which they are trying to contribute to the conversation. As I hope to demonstrate, for these theologians, it's not just an issue of overcoming the divide but also of responding to the call for renewal and integration of other disciplines – scripture, spirituality, and systematic theology, for example.

David Cloutier

David Cloutier is a former colleague of mine. We were on the faculty together at the College of St. Benedict/Saint John's University in Minnesota. He studied at Duke under Stanley Hauerwas and was one of the charter members of New Wine, New Wineskins. He works on integration of other theological disciplines as a way to get beyond the divide. For example in a 2004 article, "Composing Love Songs for the Kingdom of God? Creation and Eschatology in Catholic Sexual Ethics" he tries to get beyond what he characterizes as "competing moral theories about how to justify certain norms."⁵ Cloutier's starting point is the call for renewal of moral theology

¹ "About New Wine, New Wineskins," accessed May 19, 2014, <http://ycmt-newwineskins.com/x/about/>.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Maria Cimperman, email message to author, June 17, 2014.

⁵ David M. Cloutier, "Composing love songs for the kingdom of God? Creation and eschatology in Catholic sexual ethics," *Journal Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 2 (September 1, 2004): 71. *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 23, 2014).

referenced earlier with particular emphasis on what, as the Decree states, shedding "light on the loftiness of the calling of the faithful in Christ and the obligation that is theirs of bearing fruit in charity for the life of the world" (OT16) might mean for a renewed understanding of marriage. His title, "Composing Love Songs," refers to the New Testament's lack of an equivalent to the Song of Songs of the Old Testament.

He begins by arguing that it is a mischaracterization "to describe a shift in Catholic sexual ethics over the past fifty years as one in which a more positive view of sexuality has replaced a view that regarded sex negatively, or at least with much suspicion."⁶ Referencing the work of Peter Brown, he reminds us that the early Church's "celebration of celibacy" was grounded "in a positive view of the body's redemptive possibilities," one that make clear celibacy's eschatological dimension and that there was never "an outright denigration of marriage."⁷ In fact, marriage was viewed as good and had robust defenders such as John Chrysostom. What was lacking was any sense of an eschatological dimension.

From his perspective, what has been and is taking place "is not a turn from negative to positive but the beginnings of defining and describing marriage in a noninstrumental fashion, as a good in itself, not merely an instrument to achieve other ends. It is not so much that goods that were once ordered 'primary' and 'secondary' were now made equal but that such ranking disappeared because marriage came to be defined as a single reality . . . it was not simply a means to personal holiness but in fact a realization of holiness—a realization (however partial) of the life of the new Jerusalem. The 'lofty calling' of the Christian was not reserved to those whose sexual ethic was celibacy for the Kingdom."⁸ For Cloutier, "understanding the shift as eschatological [means] the tradition itself . . . can become the primary resource for adjudicating cultural views (not rejecting, but adjudicating) in terms of a theological vision of human destiny, both as individuals and as a species."⁹ In addition, it provides a corrective to centuries of focusing on moral norms at the expense of "an eschatological approach to the moral life."¹⁰

Having laid out this foundation, Cloutier moves on to consider the question of eschatology and how it might be related to marriage, which, he recognizes, also is a created reality. He begins by examining what he calls "the most famous recent Catholic love song,"¹¹ Pope John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Though acknowledging the Pope's deep appreciation of the goodness of the body and the total mutual self giving of married love, he quotes a statement John Paul II made at one of his general audiences: "marriage . . . belongs exclusively to this age. Marriage and procreation do not constitute . . . the eschatological future of man."¹² Thus, Cloutier concludes that the *Theology of the Body* "ultimately fails to integrate marriage into the eschatological calling of the Christian to the Kingdom."¹³

⁶ Cloutier, "Composing," 72.

⁷ Cloutier, "Composing," 73.

⁸ Cloutier, "Composing," 73.

⁹ Cloutier, "Composing," 74.

¹⁰ Cloutier, "Composing," 74.

¹¹ Cloutier, "Composing," 74.

¹² Pope John Paul II, "Pope John Paul, II (1981-12-02) Address to a general audience about the resurrection and theological anthropology." *Osservatore Romano* 713, (n.d.): 3. *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 27, 2014).

¹³ Cloutier, "Composing," 74.

He does, however, find theologians who have to one degree or another, integrated an eschatological dimension into their understanding of marriage. He focuses on Germain Grisez, Lisa Sowle Cahill, and Herbert McCabe to demonstrate how, in different ways, these theologians ground their "reflections on Christian marriage in a context in which, unlike Pope John Paul II, marriage takes on eschatological weight. The eschatological possibilities of Christian marriage, rather than any ethical theory about norms, then fuel how these ethicists talk about normative issues."¹⁴ His exposition of the three positions makes it clear that these ethicists reach different conclusions. His interest, however, isn't, as he puts it, "to take a stand on normative issues in sexual ethics; it is to illustrate what might be involved in making and contesting those arguments."¹⁵ For him, the "arguments will come to hang more and more on particular construals of theological concepts and narratives, particularly on how Christian action now relates to the 'lofty call' of the eschaton."¹⁶ He admits that he's not certain that ethicists are ready to accept and/or take on his position. In part, this is because of what he sees as insufficient or weak conceptions of the eschaton and notes that "there is room for substantial work in understanding how the eschatological promise is both already realized yet still a promise."¹⁷ In terms of marriage and sexuality, Cloutier believes that "it is becoming more and more apparent that Christians in our culture will have to start recognizing what [Grisez, Cahill, and McCabe] have already started to name: the fact that what Christians are doing when they get married means something different – or at least something more than – what everybody else is doing."¹⁸

Julie Hanlon Rubio

Julie Rubio, who is on the faculty of St. Louis University, holds a Master of Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. from University of Southern California. She is known for her work on marriage and the family. The title of her 2005 article, "Beyond the Liberal/Conservative Divide on Contraception: The Wisdom of Practitioners of Natural Family Planning and Artificial Birth Control," is indicative of approaches being taken by the next generation of moral theologians. Her goal is to move beyond the impasse that currently exists. As she states it, her "hope is that bringing the distinctive experiential wisdom of both groups into relief and exploring the common ground that both sides share will make room both for respectful agreement and mutual correction . . ."¹⁹

She presents a careful analysis of the experiences of those who use Natural Family Planning (NFP) as well as those who use artificial contraception. She looks in particular at self-giving, communication and intimacy, enhanced sexual relationship, increased mutuality, and sexuality linked to spirituality. She finds that each group brings "distinct, corrective insights to the dialogue on sexual ethics."²⁰ For example, she asks that NFP users' insights on total self-giving be taken more seriously. On the other hand, she states that "Their [proponents of contraception]

¹⁴ Cloutier, "Composing," 82.

¹⁵ Cloutier, "Composing," 83.

¹⁶ Cloutier, "Composing," 83-84.

¹⁷ Cloutier, "Composing," 84.

¹⁸ Cloutier, "Composing," 85.

¹⁹ Julie Hanlon Rubio, "Beyond the liberal/conservative divide on contraception: the wisdom of practitioners of natural family planning and artificial birth control." *Horizons* 32, no. 2 (September 2005): 291. *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index, EBSCOhost* (accessed May 22, 2014).

²⁰ Rubio, "Beyond," 293.

insistence on the multiple meanings of sex, including the neglected good of pleasure, is crucial [and notes that] [a]dvocates of contraception have argued strongly that receiving pleasure is essential to good sex, just as essential as self-giving."²¹ On balance, however, she finds that the two groups have much in common. This includes "desires to encourage self-giving inside and outside the home, cultivate strong relationships [within marriage], practice mutuality, grow in sexual intimacy, and discover the transcendent dimensions of sexuality."²² From her perspective, the most important of these "is the shared focus on the transcendent dimensions of sexuality. . . . for NFP users, [this is found] in the language of total self-giving, and for contraception advocates, in the language of passionate human desire connected to divine love."²³ Finally, she challenges theologians "to listen rightly to experience in all its diversity, not so they can prove one side right or wrong, but so that they might raise up for married Christians values worth pursuing in sexual relationships. If couples can then ask good questions . . . theologians will have made a valuable contribution."²⁴

At this point, you might be thinking that the next generation of Catholic moral theologians is only focused on sexual ethics. Let me assure you that is not the case. They are working in many areas: economic justice, war and peace, assisted reproduction, and immigration, to name a few. The work of Kristin Heyer is one example of the move to find common ground in the area of social ethics.

Kristin E. Heyer

Kristin Heyer completed her doctoral studies at Boston College in 2003. She taught for seven years at Loyola Marymount and since 2009 has been at Santa Clara University where she is the Bernard J. Hanley Professor of Religious Studies. In "Bridging the Divide in Contemporary U.S. Catholic Social Ethics," she examines two different strands in social ethics: the reformist model and the radicalist model. She focuses on the work of Bryan Hehir as representative of the reformist approach and of Michael Baxter as representative of the radicalist approach. She contends "that the truth claims and theological foundations grounding each approach call for a creative combination of both, rather than living with substantive pluralism or relegating one to minority status."²⁵

Heyer presents a thorough and nuanced description and analysis of Hehir and Baxter in part based on their writings and in part based on personal interviews she conducted with each of them. She finds that "Hehir's social ethic embodies a public church model that highly values the mutual informing of Church and society by taking empirical data seriously and communicating in modes accessible to those beyond the faith community."²⁶ She notes that critics find that this approach neither emphasizes the "central role of Jesus Christ in Christian morality" nor "attend[s] to the power of sin and evil in the world."²⁷

²¹ Rubio, "Beyond," 292.

²² Rubio, "Beyond," 293.

²³ Rubio, "Beyond," 293.

²⁴ Rubio, "Beyond," 294.

²⁵ Kristin E. Heyer, "Bridging the divide in contemporary US Catholic social ethics." *Theological Studies* 66, no. 2 (June 2005): 402. *ATLA Catholic Periodical and Literature Index*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 9, 2014).

²⁶ Heyer, "Bridging," 409.

²⁷ Heyer, "Bridging," 409.

In considering Baxter's approach, Heyer notes that Baxter characterizes himself as a "radicalist" in the mold of Dorothy Day; Baxter "does not understand his position as 'sectarian' or withdrawing from the world, but rather as rigorist discipleship that embodies Christian practices rather than translating the mandates of Scripture into accessible principles (or, worse yet, into political policies)."²⁸ For him, mainstream approaches such as Hehir's "generates a 'domesticated version' of Christianity that too willingly conforms to conventional American political protocols."²⁹ Heyer notes that "in contrast to Hehir's aim to provide a public ethic for the nation, Baxter asserts social ethics should begin in contemplation, and the most important thing we can do is to invite the faithful to observe the Sabbath. . . . As concrete alternatives to the dominant approach he opposes, Baxter advocates enacting the works of mercy on local levels, embodying alternatives to the surrounding culture of violence and mounting social criticisms from these alternate contexts alone."³⁰

Heyer undertakes a careful examination of the theological foundations of both Hehir and Baxter and each one's understanding of the role of government and points to the risks inherent in each position. For the public theology approach it is being coopted by secular society and compromising what is authentically Christian. For the radicalist approach the risk is presenting a narrow sectarianism and "exclusivity challenged by Catholic universalism."³¹ The radicalist approach also risks being unable to respond adequately to the wide range of social problems found in contemporary society.

She concludes "that Baxter too starkly separates discipleship and citizenship and that Hehir does not allow discipleship to be sufficiently normative."³² She believes a "methodology that is more theological than Hehir's approach and more public than Baxter's may serve to critique and round out each stance."³³ Such a methodology would "avoid a false opposition between charity and structural justice . . . [and] utilize liturgical resources for formation and discernment as well as education for justice and social outreach."³⁴ It would also "allow for a move away from rigid typologies and toward prophetic, critical engagement that models gospel values and engages the wider world on issues that touch human life and dignity."³⁵ For Heyer, such "mutual clarification will better ensure that Catholic social ethics remains at once faithful to the fullness of the tradition and responsible to the signs of the times."³⁶

Conclusion

I hope that this brief introduction to the work of these three theologians provides you with a sense of how they are working to bridge the divide they've inherited and find common ground. I think Rubio gave voice to the way many feel in a 2012 article in *America* magazine: "Too much

²⁸ Heyer, "Bridging," 410.

²⁹ Heyer, "Bridging," 411.

³⁰ Heyer, "Bridging," 414-15.

³¹ Heyer, "Bridging," 430.

³² Heyer, "Bridging," 439.

³³ Heyer, "Bridging," 440.

³⁴ Heyer, "Bridging," 440.

³⁵ Heyer, "Bridging," 440.

³⁶ Heyer, "Bridging," 440.

time and energy are spent by the Catholic right and left arguing about issues that divide us. It would be far better to seek common ground."³⁷

Finally, I want to say as a teacher, the work of this next generation gives me a sense of joy as I see them reach their potential in their chosen vocation and contribute to the future. As a theologian, I find myself challenged by them to listen more carefully to other voices, to engage others in ways that build relationships, and, yes, even to reconsider my own positions. Finally, as a member of the faith community, this next generation of moral theologians gives me great hope that there is a way forward and that it is possible, even in the face of difference, to find common ground.

³⁷ James T. Bretzke, Richard Gaillardetz, Julie Hanlon Rubio, "The Road Ahead." *America* 207, no. 7 (September 24, 2012): 12. *MasterFILE Premier*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 11, 2014).