

Introduction: Complex Situations

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AS MOST CATHOLIC MORAL THEOLOGIANs KNOW, THE manualist tradition in Catholic moral theology presented a clean, tidy, but misleading image of the moral life. Armed with a few philosophical principles and even fewer theological ones, it suggests that the vast scope of ordinary life can be mapped by simple, neat, normative categories. On any given topic, there (generally) appeared to be one version of the good and an avalanche of ways to miss the mark. The work of the priests, for whom the manuals were written, was to momentarily return the masses to these narrow norms (week by penitential week), perhaps occasionally making “pastoral” concessions to human weakness. The work of moralists was to define the norms and adjudicate occasional anomalies, either grafting them somehow into the norm or rejecting them as prohibited. In neither case was reality permitted to challenge the norms.

But, to paraphrase Ian Malcolm in *Jurassic Park*, reality always finds a way. Or, as Thomas Kuhn noted in the (natural) sciences, it is the accumulation of “anomalies”—realities that stubbornly violate paradigm-induced expectations and cannot simply be ignored or explained away—that eventually initiates paradigm shifts.¹ In fact, the anomalies—points of slippage, puzzlement, and disconnect—prove to be generative sites of transformation. Like the Coffin Illusion that illustrates the cover of the current issue, *prima facie* assumptions, ossified perspectives, and rigid frameworks can make it difficult to see the realities that are always there, but patient, careful attention can bring them into visibility, entirely transforming what we see.

The articles in the July 2024 issue of the *Journal of Moral Theology* bring to the fore a series of anomalies for Catholic moral theology or, as one might call them, complex situations. These complex situations highlight Pope Francis’s constant maxim that reality is greater than

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), 52–53.

ideas. These very realities inform his methodological vision for theology articulated in *Ad Theologiam Promovendam* which, as I argued in the January 2024 issue of this journal, itself provides a roadmap for Catholic moral theology moving forward.² Only such a method—synodal, contextual, transdisciplinary, sacramental, and (in)formed by *caritas*—understands that what is foundational are not abstract philosophical principles but rather the necessarily complex realities of creation, human life and, therefore, the Christian moral life.

Yet the manualist method continues to cling tenaciously to our discipline, particularly but not solely within magisterial circles. Insofar as tradition is an ongoing argument (per Alasdair MacIntyre), this is to be expected a mere sixty years after the Second Vatican Council. We see the tension between the manualist tradition and Pope Francis's conciliar vision at work in the articles gathered for our July 2024 issue. The latter opens with an analysis of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith's *Dignitas Infinita*.³ Based on his incisive analysis of "The Evolution of Human Dignity in Catholic Morality" published in our January 2021 issue, I invited Bernard Brady to offer a perspective on the Declaration.⁴ His title—"Dignitas Infinita: A Syllabus of Errors for the 21st Century?"—captures the direction of his analysis.⁵ Noting that the Declaration helpfully expands the complexity of the moral landscape by incorporating Pope Francis's vision, he puzzles—as does this editor—over the strange invocation of "moral" and "existential" dignity as well as the conceptual lacunae that pervade the document. The Declaration, Brady suggests, embodies the tensions within the Catholic moral tradition—between norms narrowly defined and held in an iron-clad grip and the relentless witness of human reality.

This tension is front and center in Anthony Hollowell's "Moral Impossibility and Communion to the Divorced and Remarried."⁶ Here Hollowell analyzes Pope Francis's proposal, gestured at in a controversial footnote in *Amoris Laetitia* and elaborated in his letter to the bishops of Buenos Aires, for a praxis of Communion for the divorced and remarried who find themselves in complex—or, might we say, real—situations. Via Aquinas, Wojtyła, *Veritatis Splendor*,

² See M. Therese Lysaught, "Ad (Synodalem) Theologiam (Moralem) Promovendam," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 1 (2024): 1–14, doi.org/10.55476/001c.92079.

³ Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Declaration on Human Dignity (Dignitas Infinita)* (April 2, 2024), press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/04/08/240408c.html.

⁴ Bernard Brady, "The Evolution of Human Dignity in Catholic Morality," *Journal of Moral Theology* 10, no. 1 (2021): 1–25, jmt.scholasticahq.com/article/18891.

⁵ Bernard V. Brady, "Dignitas Infinita: A Syllabus of Errors for the 21st Century?," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 6–17.

⁶ Anthony Hollowell, "Moral Impossibility and Communion to the Divorced and Remarried," *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 18–43.

and other key figures of the tradition, Hollowell argues against those critics who voiced “doubts” about the proposal’s continuity with the Catholic moral tradition. Central to his argument is what he names the principle of “moral impossibility.” His analysis equally shows, however, the extraordinary difficulties real human, married life faces in surmounting the bulwark of Catholic moral theory. Not only does the theological justification of Pope Francis’s proposal require a heavy theoretical lift; readers know well how much venom, animosity, and threats of schism have been directed against Pope Francis for this one, small tentative opening to the actual realities and pain of real people.

The complexity of reality arises not only *vis-à-vis* the actions or decisions that must be taken by real people in concrete circumstances. It also arises from the inescapable diversity of human persons—a diversity little acknowledged within the anthropology of the Catholic moral tradition. Over against a Catholic theological anthropology that presumes—and subsequently mandates—that all “normal” human persons are sexual persons, Jessica Coblenz lifts up the enduring but often obfuscated reality of asexual persons. In “Catholic Anthropology beyond Compulsory Sexuality,” she argues that the tradition’s “compulsory sexuality,” as she names it, compromises the intellectual integrity of Catholicism’s theological systems, insofar as it fails both to theorize and adequately account for the reality of asexuality.⁷ She identifies several striking implications of asexuality for theological anthropology, moral theology, and Christian doctrine.

Complexity also arises from the encounter of diverse paradigms. One such encounter occurs at the intersection of cultures as radically distinct as Catholicism and Vietnamese Confucianism. Ngoc Nguyen centers attention on this interface in her article “Inculturation of Catholic Virtue Ethics through Vietnamese Women’s Reclaimed Confucian Virtues.”⁸ Bringing the voice of Vietnamese Catholicism to the *Journal of Moral Theology* for the first time in its 12-year history, Nguyen introduces readers to the Confucian virtue paradigm, especially as it mapped (and continues to map) the complex lives of Vietnamese women. Demonstrating points of contact and difference between Confucian and Catholic accounts of virtue, she is honest about the ongoing challenges of both traditions for women’s full flourishing as human persons. She also argues that especially via the exemplar of Mary, the Catholic virtue tradition offers new and liberative possibilities for Vietnamese Catholic women, transforming at the same time their realities and the Catholic tradition itself.

⁷ Jessica Coblenz, “Catholic Anthropology beyond Compulsory Sexuality,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 44–62.

⁸ Ngoc Nguyen, “Inculturation of Catholic Virtue Ethics through Vietnamese Women’s Reclaimed Confucian Virtues,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 63–85.

Complexity also arises at the interface between diverse disciplines. Engagement with the social sciences is difficult to find in the pages of a theological journal. Sean T. Lansing brings this lens to the consideration of Catholic social thought. In “Cultivating a Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice: A Quantitative Analysis,” Lansing asks not only “What does the Catholic tradition teach?” but as importantly, “How can Catholic educators, parents, pastors, and others help form people to both understand and live this tradition?”⁹ Via an original quantitative empirical study, he identifies factors that promote such lifelong commitment—the influence of significant persons, exposure to injustice, education and learning, and work experience alongside religion and spirituality. Between the lines of his analysis, we see how the complex situations of injustice have crucial epistemological power leading to knowledge that can challenge thin moral canards as well as the oversimplified—and therefore largely ineffective—approach to moral formation embodied in most Catholic catechesis. Echoing Pope Francis’s counsel that priests should “smell like the sheep,” Lansing’s analysis points to a crucial lacuna in the formation of clergy and church leaders fostered by the seminary system.

There’s also nothing like the complexity of novel technologies to provide questions and anomalies that theology has not, heretofore, had to address. In this issue, Octavian M. Machidon adds to the *Journal of Moral Theology*’s ongoing engagement with the explosive and accelerating field of artificial intelligence. Surprisingly, Catholic analysis of AI has drawn little on the theology of Benedict XVI. Machidon addresses this lacuna in his article, “Analyzing the Anthropological Implications of Artificial Intelligence through the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.”¹⁰ As becomes clear in his analysis, one of the grave risks of AI is that it eliminates the complexity of the human person—our creativity, our performativity—reducing people to numbers in a powerful but subtle mathesis. Here the Catholic tradition stands as the champion of complexity and a source to withstand such dehumanization.

Our final piece returns us to our opening problematic. With the July 2024 issue, we revive what has been an occasional feature of the *Journal of Moral Theology*: the review essay. We do so by focusing on one of the most painful examples of the inability of the Catholic moral tradition to deal with the complexities and pain of reality: the

⁹ Sean T. Lansing, “Cultivating a Lifelong Commitment to Social Justice: A Quantitative Analysis,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 86–113.

¹⁰ Octavian M. Machidon, “Analyzing the Anthropological Implications of Artificial Intelligence through the Theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 114–136.

clergy sexual abuse crisis. In “Distortions of Normativity in the Church’s Sexual Abuse Scandal: The Role of Moral Theology,” Bernard G. Prusak reviews work by the psychologist Marie Keenan, philosophers Herlinde Pauer-Studer and J. David Velleman, and theologian Norbert J. Rigali to argue that a key cause of the scandal lies not in the scapegoats of moral relativism or the sexual revolution of the 1960s.¹¹ Rather, Prusak’s interlocutors suggest that one of the major roots of the crisis lies in a moral blindness induced by a distorted view of the moral life—a distortion intrinsic to the Catholic manualist tradition itself.

If Prusak is right, then the Church’s response to clergy sexual abuse—pre-hoc safeguarding procedures, post-hoc tribunals with lay people, etc.—cannot, by definition, address the etiology of the crisis. If that etiology lies at least in large part within deeply rooted conceptual and theological flaws in the manualist tradition, those flaws must be directly named, analyzed, and rectified. This may well take another sixty years, but the work is urgent, both for the well-being of real people in the “complex situations” which form the stuff of everyday life as well as for the church itself. **M**

¹¹ Bernard G. Prusak, “Distortions of Normativity in the Church’s Sexual Abuse Scandal: The Role of Moral Theology,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 13, no. 2 (2024): 137–155.